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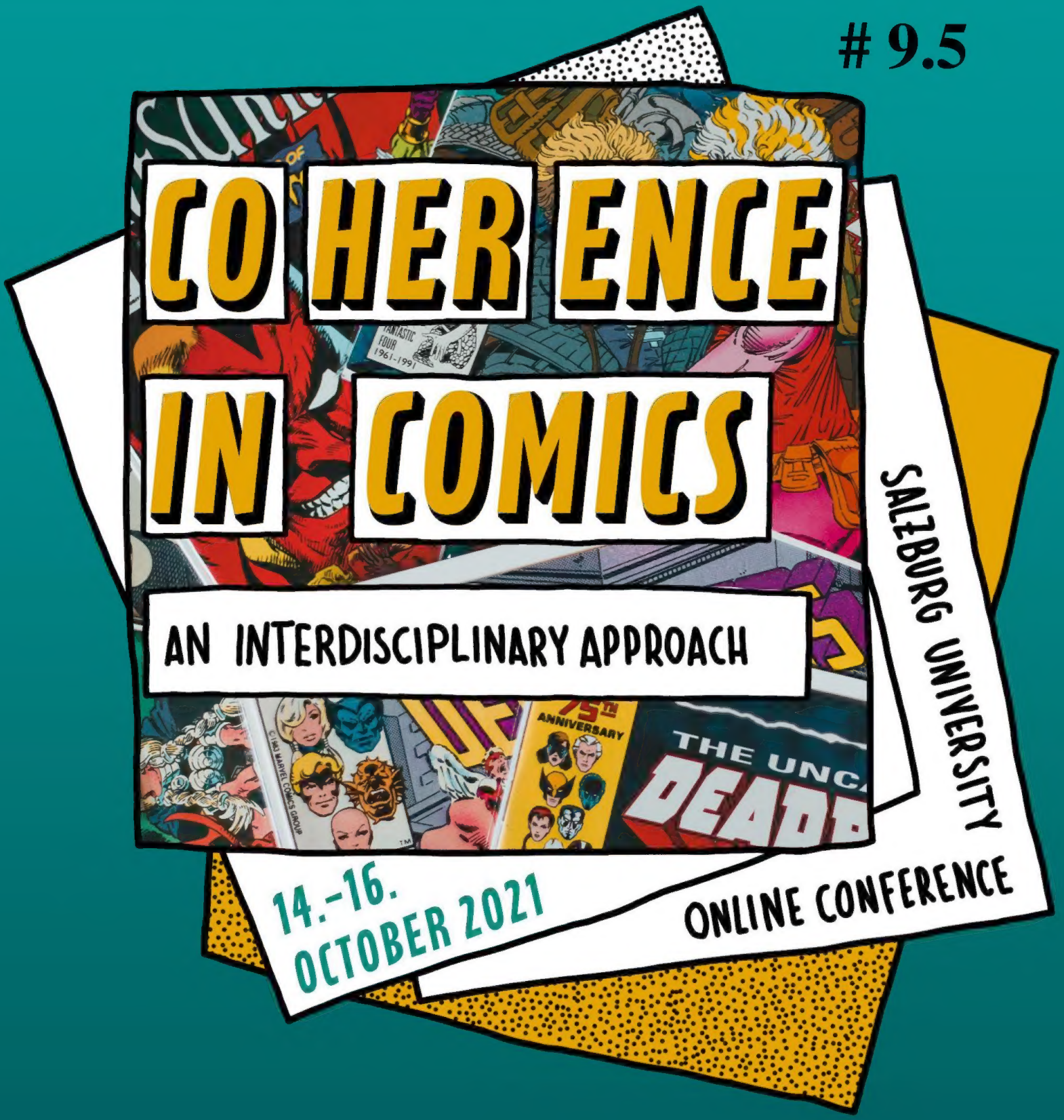

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Über diese Ausgabe

Elisabeth Krieber (Salzburg), Markus Oppolzer (Salzburg) und Hartmut Stöckl (Salzburg)

Diese Sonderausgabe versammelt eine kleine Auswahl an Beiträgen, die im Rahmen der 16. Jahrestagung der deutschen Gesellschaft für Comicforschung (2021) erstmalig präsentiert wurden. Pandemiebedingt fand sie online statt, was auf reges Interesse auch außerhalb Europas stieß und schließlich zur Entscheidung führte, die gesamte Tagung auf Englisch zu veranstalten. Die zentrale Idee der Konferenz war es, Kohärenz im Comic aus unterschiedlichen Perspektiven zu beleuchten und somit eine interdisziplinäre Annäherung zu befördern. Durch die Fragmentierung des Comics in Einzelbilder und die multimodale Überlagerung von Zeichensystemen stehen Comicforscher_innen vor der Herausforderung, dem Zerfall in das Bruchstückhafte eine Theorie der Kontinuität und Konnektivität entgegenzusetzen. Diese muss zwangsläufig auch die Rezipient_innen mitberücksichtigen. Jared Gardner sieht in dieser Kombination aus Leerstellen und Leser_innenaktivierung das zentrale Merkmal des Comics, »a form that depends as much on what is left out as on what is included – and a form that depends on an active and imaginative reader capable of filling in the gaps in time« (xi; siehe auch Stein, 137). Die Gestaltpsychologie lieferte nicht nur das Fundament für Scott McClouds Prinzip der konzeptuellen Integration (*closure*), sondern auch für Wolfgang Isers Rezeptionsästhetik und die darauf basierenden Comictheorien von Thierry Groensteen (114), Charles Hatfield (xiii–xiv) oder Barbara Postema. Isers Theorie folgend schaffen Leerstellen »als ausgesparte Anschließbarkeit der Textsegmente zugleich die Bedingungen ihrer Beziehbarkeit« (302). Sie stellen also nicht einfach Lücken dar, sondern müssen als strategisch gestaltete Schnittstellen zwischen den Segmenten und somit als bedeutungskonstitutiv erachtet werden. Iser zieht an dieser Stelle den Filmschnitt zum Vergleich heran, um die Funktion der Leerstelle als sinnstiftendes Element zu unterstreichen: »Hier wie dort eröffnet die Leerstelle zwischen den Segmenten bzw. der Schnitt zwischen den Bildern ein Netz von Beziehbarkeiten, durch das sich die Segmente bzw. die Bilder wechselseitig bestimmen« (303). Er geht davon aus, dass die Zuschreibung von Bedeutungspotenzialen über das Netzwerk, die Sequenz und die Gegenüberstellung von Segmenten gesteuert wird, was er als »ein allgemeines Charakteristikum für alle künstlerischen Medien« (302) erachtet. Das schließt den Comic, zumindest implizit, mit ein. Hier sind manche Leerstellen (*gutter*) direkt sicht-

bar, wobei zu bedenken ist, dass Isers Rezeptionsästhetik meist andere Formen der konzeptuellen Integration in den Fokus nimmt, als unmittelbar benachbarte Panels miteinander in Beziehung zu setzen (Stein, 129). Postema und Gardner verstehen die sichtbaren Leerstellen zwischen den Panels somit eher als Illustration eines zugrundliegenden Prinzips, das auf allen Ebenen der Bedeutungszuschreibung relevant ist (Postema, xviii; Gardner, xi).

McClouds Gestalttheorie (63–64) beschränkt sich hingegen sehr schnell auf den *gutter* und die sichtbaren Unterschiede zwischen den Panels (66–74), statt eine Theorie dafür zu liefern, wie Leser_innen die Leerstellen auf einer konzeptuellen Ebene füllen, die über die mikrostrukturelle, lineare Bilderfolge hinausgeht. Er mystifiziert geradezu jene kognitiven Prozesse, die zur Integration in größere Sinnzusammenhänge führen, indem er von »human imagination«, »magic and mystery« (66) spricht. Iser betont, dass »die synthetische Aktivität des Lesens« auch rückwärts gewandt sein kann, wenn »die Modifikation der Erwartung durch die Satzfolge nicht ohne Rückwirkung auf das vorher Gelesene« (182) bleibt. In *Narrative Comprehension: A Discourse Analysis* erklärt Catherine Emmott, wie man diesen bidirektionalen Prozess der Modifikation bestehender Schemata und der Erwartungshaltungen von Leser_innen aus linguistischer Sicht modellieren kann. Dazu zieht sie Situationsmodelle bzw. kontextuelle Rahmen (104, 121) heran, die im Hinblick auf die aktuellen Gegebenheiten als Interpretations- bzw. Protentionshilfe fungieren, aber ihrerseits ständig aktualisiert werden müssen (Cohn 2021, 38–42).

McCloud blendet bei seiner Typologisierung der Panelübergänge (70–74) zwei Faktoren aus, die in einem solchen Kontext oft als essentiell betrachtet werden: der Anteil der Sprache (Mikkonen, 14–15, 29; Miodrag) und die narrative Einbettung der Sequenz (Thon, 99). Kai Mikkonen weist darauf hin, dass die Redundanz in der Repräsentation von Figuren zur narrativen Kontinuität entscheidend beiträgt:

> The continuing presence of a character or a group of characters in a sequence of images, acting out a situation, or participating in an event, is possibly the most conventional feature of narrative comics. The ability to follow an easily identifiable character, such as Tintin, Astro Boy, Tank Girl, or »One Note Man«, in evolving action from panel to panel, maintains a sense of continuity and coherence in a narrative sequence. (90)

McCloud beschränkt sich aber nur darauf, wie viel ›kognitive Belastung‹ der Übergang bei den Leser_innen bewirkt (Saraceni, 177), die von sehr gering (bei einem Moment später) zu sehr stark (bei keinerlei erkennbaren Bezügen) reicht. Protagonist_innen und deren Handlungsbögen und innere Zustände (Mikkonen, 42) spielen dabei keine Rolle.

Während er an anderer Stelle Wort-Bild-Kombinationen kategorisiert (McCloud, 152–155), zieht er hier die Möglichkeit nicht in Erwägung, Bilder mithilfe eines verbalen Begleitkommentars (*voice-over-narration*) zu kontextualisieren (Postema, 79). Nimmt man diese Bild-Text-Relationen als eine konkrete Ausprägung von Multimodalität in Comics ernst,

müsste nicht nur Text an sich in der Comicwissenschaft einen höheren Stellenwert haben (Miodrag), sondern vor allem im Wechselspiel mit den Illustrationen analysiert werden (Tseng, Laubock und Pflaeging; Tseng und Bateman; Bateman, Wildfeuer und Hiippala). Als Verfechter einer Visual Narrative Grammar (2021, 42–51; 2019) gesteht Cohn zwar ein, dass es sich bei Bilderbüchern und Comics um genuin multimodale Texte handelt (2021, 21), beschränkt sich aber dennoch auf die Bildebene (2021, 21; 2019, 306) und Gattungen, bei denen diese dominiert, wie z.B. in Superheldencomics (2021, 5; 2019, 306).

Bei diesem Genre kommen in Bezug auf Kontinuität noch ganz andere Faktoren ins Spiel, die vor allem mit der seriellen Publikationsform, der langen Laufzeit und den vielen Neustarts (*reboots*) beliebter Reihen, der Zusammenführung unterschiedlichster Charaktere und Handlungsstränge in (angeblich) konsistente Erzählwelten und schließlich mit den zahlreichen Adaptationen und transmedialen Fortschreibungen der Geschichten zusammenhängen. Der in der Rezeptionsästhetik so wichtigen Berücksichtigung der Rezipient_innen kommt in diesem Forschungskontext eine besondere Rolle zu, da sich die Fankulturen, die sich parallel dazu entwickelt haben, neben einer detaillierten Analyse (*forensic fandom*; Mittell, 229) auch einer ausgeprägten Partizipation verschrieben haben (Stein und Etter; Stein; Baetens und Frey; Mittell). An dieser Stelle lassen sich nun die sechs Beiträge dieser Ausgabe in dem skizzierten Rahmen verorten.

Lukas Wildes Aufsatz widmet sich essayistischen Comics, die der zuvor postulierten These widersprechen, Leser_innen würden vor allem auf ihre narrative Kompetenz zurückgreifen, um die nötigen Zusammenhänge über die lokalen Bedeutungszuschreibungen hinaus herstellen zu können. In den gewählten Beispieltexten (Lynda Barrys *Making Comics*, Nick Sousanis *Unflattening* und Schloggers online Comics) gibt es keine Protagonist_innen im herkömmlichen Sinn, deren Schicksale man vorhersehen und mitverfolgen könnte. Durch den hohen Textanteil, der auch den alternativen Begriff ›illustrierte Essays‹ erklärt, wird es nochmals deutlich schwieriger, auf der rein visuellen Ebene das Verbindende zu finden. Dies lässt sich auch für manch autobiografische Comics argumentieren, die sich auf starke Erzählstimmen verlassen (z.B. Harvey Pekars *American Splendor*; Alison Bechdels *Fun Home*). Hier stellen sich also ganz grundlegende definitorische und gattungstheoretische Fragen, die anhand von drei Fallstudien im Detail erörtert werden.

Barbara Eggerts Beitrag stellt Horst Steins sogenannten ›Haydn Zyklus‹ vor, der aus einer achtseitigen Comicerzählung besteht, die im Geburtshaus der Haydn Brüder in Rohrau, Niederösterreich, in die permanente Sammlung integriert ist. Dafür hat der Künstler eng mit dem Kurator Werner Hanak-Lettner zusammengearbeitet. Die daraus resultierende Familiengeschichte geht inhaltlich über das berühmte Komponistenpaar hinaus, aber auch über die Grenzen des Comics selbst, da hier zahlreiche Querverweise zu anderen Ausstellungsstücken bestehen und die Geschichte transmedial über mehrere Räume hinweg erzählt wird.

Besucher_innen müssen nicht nur die Teile des als ›graphic novel‹ bezeichneten Comics entdecken und über die physische Distanz hinweg in eine zusammenhängende Erzählung integrieren, sondern auch transmediale Bezüge zu den anderen Exponaten herstellen. Dieser Sonderfall der museumspädagogischen Vermittlungsarbeit wird hier anschaulich und detailliert vorgestellt, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf der Funktion des Zyklus als Herzstück einer vielschichtig verwobenen Erzählung liegt.

J. Scott Jordan und **Victor Dandridge, Jr.** wählen die Superhero-Comicreihe *Invincible* als Beispiel, um die Wechselwirkung aus textbasierter Affektsteuerung und den Reaktionen der Leser_innen näher zu betrachten. Comicschaffende können gezielt die Erwartungshaltungen von Fans unterwandern, indem zunächst etablierte Konventionen bedient bzw. evoziert werden, nur um diese dann strategisch und – im Idealfall – völlig überraschend zu durchbrechen. Diese Dynamik aus kalkulierbaren Leser_innenvorhersagen und Überraschungselementen führt zu einer höheren Aufmerksamkeit und Wahrscheinlichkeit sich mit den Inhalten genauer auseinanderzusetzen. In diesem Kontext plädieren die Autoren auch für den Einsatz von Comics im Schulunterricht, weil hier die richtige Balance zwischen Abwechslung und Komplexität der Inhalte gegeben sei.

Mark Hibbett beschäftigt sich mit einem Sonderfall des Bildzitats, das vom Comickünstler John Byrne strategisch eingesetzt wurde, um Schlüsselszenen aus kanonischen *Fantastic Four* Handlungssträngen in Erinnerung zu rufen, aber auch um diese zu modifizieren und mit seinen eigenen Vorstellungen und Geschichten in Einklang zu bringen. Dieser revisionistische Zugang diente auch dazu, Kontrolle über Charaktere zu erlangen, in diesem Fall Dr. Doom, die bereits auf eine langjährige Geschichte zurückblicken können. Indem er seine eigenen Bücher als neuen Standard betrachtete und diese fleißig als Referenzmaterial zitierte, versuchte er frühere ›Fehlgriffe‹ – zumindest aus seiner Sicht – zu revidieren und den Leser_innen eine bestimmte Interpretation der Figur nahezulegen. Dieser Vorgang der retroaktiven Bedeutungszuschreibung (Stein, 142) bzw. der Überlagerung früherer Erzählungen in Form eines Palimpsests ist gar nicht so selten, weil die Produktion von Superheldenreihen, deren Neustart und damit verbundene Wechsel der kreativen Köpfe zwangsläufig kompetitierende Versionen hervorbringt. In diesem Fall wurde es nicht den Fans überlassen, die Versionen als autarke künstlerische Leistungen zu vergleichen, sondern Byrne griff direkt in die Kontinuität und Kanonizität von *Fantastic Four* ein, was zwangsläufig Debatten über seine Legitimität und Autorität nach sich zog.

Das komplexe Scheitern von Superhelden-Cross-Over-Narrativen ist das Thema des nächsten Beitrags. **Amadeo Gandolfo** wählt Grant Morrisons *Final Crisis* als prototypisches Beispiel für die beinahe unüberbrückbaren Spannungen zwischen den hohen künstlerischen Ansprüchen, den Erwartungen der Fans und den Herausforderungen serieller Produktion, zu denen redaktionelle Einflussnahme, mangelnde Koordination, kaum einzuhaltende Fristen und die kreative Zwickmühle zählen allen Titeln, Figuren, Kolleg_innen, Leser_innen

und der Unternehmensleitung (in diesem Fall DC Comics) irgendwie gerecht zu werden. Gandolfo nähert sich diesem Thema nicht so sehr aus einer strukturell-analytischen Perspektive, um z.B. die internen Ungereimtheiten des Cross-Overs genau zu dokumentieren, sondern mit einem kulturwissenschaftlich-historischen Ansatz, der den Produktionsprozess und die spezifischen Rahmenbedingungen unter die Lupe nimmt.

Stephan Packards Aufsatz bietet einen passenden Schlusspunkt, weil er viele der Fragestellungen nochmals aufgreift und miteinander in Beziehung setzt. Dazu zählen Jordan und Dandridges Wechselwirkung zwischen textuellen Signalen und den Reaktionen der Leser_innen, besonders in Bezug auf Überraschungsmomente, McClouds Theorie zu *closure*, die Konventionen von Superheldencomics, Multimodalität und Kraffts hermeneutische, wenn auch schlussendlich strukturalistisch-linguistische Theorie einer Comicgrammatik – all das und mehr verpackt in eine Analyse zweier *Amazing Spider-Man* Hefte aus den 1960er Jahren.

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Coherence in Comics

An Interdisciplinary Approach

Markus Oppolzer (Salzburg)

The 16th annual conference of the German Society for Comics Studies (ComFor), which took place from 14 to 16 October 2021 as an online event organized by the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Salzburg, was dedicated to an exploration of coherence in comics from various theoretical perspectives. Due to the fragmentation of comics into distinct units and the co-presence and interdependence of various modes, all scholars – no matter their academic affiliation – face the challenge of providing a theory of continuity and connectivity that transcends the particularities of the single constitutive element.

In the following, I use Scott McCloud's classic *Understanding Comics* and Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* as two related starting points that allow me to introduce basic concepts, voice some criticism and branch out into more recent theories. McCloud popularized the Gestalt principle of »closure«, which he describes as the »phenomenon of *observing the parts* but *perceiving the whole*« (63). At first, he introduces closure as a universal cognitive principle that applies to numerous contexts (»In an *incomplete world*, we must *depend* on closure for our very *survival*«, 63; original emphasis), offering his readers several examples of how »a mere *shape* or *outline* is enough to trigger closure« (64). However, he promptly limits the scope of his enquiry to just one context by exclusively associating this cognitive feat with the gutter: »human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea« (66). Since both Gestalt psychology and McCloud's understanding of meaning-making rely on holistic perception, »mentally completing that which is *incomplete* based on *past experience*« (63; see Bateman, Wildfeuer and Hiippala, 305–306, 309), an affinity to core principles of reader-response criticism and constructivist notions of human cognition is self-evident.

Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that Wolfgang Iser has been quite influential in those fields of comics studies that do not find his complete lack of empirical evidence disconcerting. Two seminal publications, Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging*

Literature and Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* barely acknowledge their indebtedness to Iser (Hatfield, xiii–xiv; Groensteen 2007, 114), despite the fact that Hatfield's notion of ›tensions‹ and Groensteen's ›iconic solidarity‹ take their inspiration from key concepts in Iser's theory of aesthetic response. Some monographs embrace Iser's interaction between the literary work and its readers as a starting point and basic foundation (Postema; Oppolzer), while other publications signal, at least, a certain relevance (e.g. Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014a, 185; Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014b, 377; Stein, 128–130), usually in view of his definition of blanks/gaps as central narrative devices and the acknowledgement of the readers' active construction of the narrative's meaning. Bateman and Wildfeuer describe the transaction between text and reader in the following way: »discourse structures require no pregiven ›grammar‹ or set of phrase-structure rules to determine their acceptability or to guide semantic interpretation – they arise dynamically during discourse interpretation as part of a negotiation process between the formal clues an artefact gives and an interpreter's construal of that artefact as meaningful« (2014b, 377).

In *The Act of Reading* Iser explains how, as »blanks mark the suspension of connectability between textual segments, they simultaneously form a condition for the connection to be established« (195). Readers can make sense of this »heterogeneous material«, as »each textual segment does not carry its own determinacy [meaning potential] within itself, but will gain this in relation to other segments. Here literature may join hands with other media, such as the cinema« (195). Iser draws an explicit analogy to the editing techniques of film: »Between segments and cuts there is an empty space, giving rise to a whole network of possible connections which will endow each segment or picture with its determinate meaning« (196). Iser's ›blank‹ is not just an empty space between two segments, but a functional structure or »signifying absence« (Stein, 127) that guides the imagination of readers and predetermines – at least to a certain extent – the meaning of the text. While it is tempting to compare this to Groensteen's concept of ›iconic solidarity‹ (2007, 17–20), there are noticeable differences that Daniel Stein points out:

> the gutter differs substantially both in its frequency and its functions from Iser's notion of gaps, or blanks, as systematic spaces (*Systemstellen*) in that its systematicity is always directly visible on the level of the signifier (a spatial absence) and inevitably meaningful on the level of the signified through the narrative progression from panel to panel as well as among panels across the entire narrative. (129; see Postema, xiv)

However, despite this literalization of Iser's metaphorical gaps on the comics page in the form of blank spaces in between panels, »they also indicate the gaps contained in the next level of the system« (Postema, xiii). Accordingly, Barbara Postema »takes the concept of the gap as a signifying unit in the sequence and theorizes how its function can be expanded upon, how it can be understood to operate at all levels of comics signification« (xviii). This move beyond the simplistic linearity of panel transitions requires a different type of closure:

»The reader's task, however, is not so much to fill in the missing parts in order to complete the narrative as it is to negotiate different possibilities of combining the existing elements of a text« (Stein, 129; see Iser, 97–99, 116). In contrast to McCloud, Iser's gaps are not exclusively concerned with the microlevel of narration. He explicitly describes the »act of image-building« as »polysynthetic« (148), thus potentially involving the entire narrative.

This is why Thierry Groensteen struggles with McCloud's lack of interest in translinear storytelling, his disregard for narrative coherence (2013, 17, 181) and especially the complete absence of the page as a narrative unit from his *Understanding Comics*, which Groensteen calls »the major blind spot of his theory« (2013, 74). McCloud attaches little importance to any form of iconic solidarity beyond his six types of panel transitions:

> Comics readers are […] conditioned by other media and the ›*real time*‹ of everyday life to expect a very *linear progression*. Just a *straight line* from *point A* to *point B*. But is that *necessary*? / For *now*, these questions are the territory of *games* and *strange little experiments*. (106)

In Iser's theory, the reading path is bidirectional and new insights »have a retroactive effect on what has already been read, which now appears quite different«, so that the latest *gestalten* »instigate a restructuring of past syntheses« (111; see Postema, 50, 66, 113).

Apart from this fixation on a linear progression, McCloud also abandons the central idea that any text is incomplete, merely a »blueprint« (Rosenblatt, 86, 88) or ›construction manual‹, whose meaning the reader »has to assemble« (Iser, ix). Since he claims that all signs are iconic (26) he believes that »[p]ictures are *received* information« for which »[w]e need no formal education to ›*get the message*‹. The message is *instantaneous*« (49). Justifiably Neil Cohn finds these »assumptions of universality« (2021, 2) problematic in McCloud (2021, 1), yet this phenomenon of confusing our western tradition of creating and reading images with some form of pictorial lingua franca is more widespread than one may think. The picture-book artist Shaun Tan, for example, makes the paradoxical claim that his wordless graphic novel *The Arrival* is not affected by the biases and subterfuge that comes with language, while emphasizing the importance of the book as a political statement against xenophobia:

> It's a subject that demanded an unusual and alternative approach, given that new immigrants are so often represented in the media, especially here in Australia, as somewhat anonymous and often dehumanized by a negative political debate. I wondered if that same anonymity could be used positively to generate empathy rather than prejudice by simply narrowing the focus to intimate details of a migrant's life and allowing the reader to really see things from a perspective that's at once personal and general, to walk in the shoes of a nameless person entering an unfamiliar country. And, most importantly, avoid conventional language in order to allow a very open interpretation: just a quiet stream of intimate pictures devoid of comment, prejudice, or political noise. Like a tree, a cloud, or a shadow, the drawings *just are*. (Tan 2011, 6–7)

In contrast to Tan's optimistic notion of illustration as a natural form of communication, Maureen Walsh, Maya Cranitch and Karen Maras report substantial problems with a group

of refugee students from the Sudan who were confronted with wordless picturebooks, in this case David Wiesner's *Flotsam*. They did not know how to read the highly conventionalized modes of expression that Western art relies upon. They were »unfamiliar with book handling skills« (10) in general and »had not yet acquired the ability to ›look‹ and ›see‹ for textual meanings« (12). Walsh, Cranitch and Maras summarize the students' problems in the following manner:

> the question of cultural content of visual images is an important factor that needs to be considered. The students from refugee backgrounds had not been regularly exposed to the type of visual texts that are part of Western culture and therefore were not able to make intertextual links or understand the use of perspective or the overall cultural context. (12)

Cohn makes a similar point about comics and refers to this type of misconception as the Sequential Image Transparency Assumption (SITA) (2021, 3). In Iser's understanding, texts only provide »*instructions* for the *production* of the signified« (65), which leads to idiosyncratic readings, a »process of continual correction« (167) and the necessity to negotiate meanings with other readers. However, the ›instructions‹ themselves already rely on conventionalized, culture-specific signs.

McCloud only makes a half-hearted attempt to explain closure based on narrative competence. While some of his panel transitions do reference narratological terms, such as ›time‹, ›action‹ or ›scene‹, he simply fails to acknowledge that readers trace the »continuing presence of a character or a group of characters in a sequence of images, acting out a situation, or participating in an event, [which] is possibly the most conventional feature of narrative comics. The ability to follow an easily identifiable character, […] in evolving action from panel to panel, maintains a sense of continuity and coherence in a narrative sequence« (Mikkonen, 90; see Bateman, Wildfeuer and Hiippala, 308, 312, 314–315). Therefore, Kai Mikkonen asserts that the »narratological potential of McCloud's six types of transition […] is compromised by the fact that the typology does not take the context into consideration« (41). He points out that a »change of truth-value (modality in the linguistic sense) with regard to the image content in the panels« is one of the most common types of transition, but McCloud is not interested in such narrative functions: »The modality-to-modality transition, involving a transition in the truth-value or credibility of what is seen, for instance, in a dream, fantasy, hallucination, or memory sequence, is regularly accompanied by stylistic markers, such as changes in the graphic line, lettering, and color, or alterations in verbal narration, layout, and perspective« (42). Iser takes the exact opposite approach and treats storytelling as the very foundation of human cognition and the predominant way we make sense of reality:

> the final gap *can* only be closed through a fiction, since it is both the function and achievement of the literary work to bring into existence something which has no reality of its own, and which can never be finally deduced from existing realities. Now for all the given material that goes to make up a mental image,

> it is only the fictive element that can establish the consistency necessary to endow it with the appearance of reality, for consistency is not a given quality of reality. And so the fictive element always comes to the fore when we realize the projective nature of our mental images. This does not mean that we then wish to exclude the fictive element from our images, for this is structurally impossible anyway – without the fictive link there can be no image. But it can mean that, through our awareness of the fictive closure, integral to our acts of ideation, we may be able to transcend our hitherto fixed positions, and at least we shall be conscious of the intriguing role which fiction plays in our ideational and conceptual activities. (225)

Mario Saraceni makes an effort to explain McCloud's six types of panel transitions as a scale of increasing cognitive effort on the readers' part: »What I find particularly valuable about McCloud's taxonomy is that it allows one to relate each category to a greater degree of reader's involvement« (177). Therefore, McCloud's sixth type is »*non-sequitur*, which offers no logical relationship between panels *whatsoever*!« (McCloud, 72). It is safe to say that a ›non-sequitur‹ is much more »the territory of *games* and *strange little experiments*« (McCloud, 106) than the idea of iconic solidarity and translinear storytelling. According to McCloud's own statistics and graphs, three of these types never appear in Kirby's work (74–75), which does make it »an *inexact science* at *best*« (74), considering that 50% of the analytical categories are not even relevant.

If there is one thing that most critics can agree on, it is the narrative intent of most comics: »Perhaps more than many other media, comics can be considered to be a prototypically narrative form. While there may be some examples of nonnarrative comics [...], most comics tell stories« (Thon, 99; see Cohn 2021, 1; Postema, 58). Since McCloud's interest in narrativity is not very pronounced, he also discounts language as a constitutive part of the art form in general (9; see Mikkonen, 14–15, 29; Miodrag). Despite the fact that Postema subscribes to a similar definition of comics as McCloud, prioritizing the visual over the verbal (80), she still acknowledges the latter's potential function as ›voice over‹ narration:

> Text appears in comics in word balloons and in captions. One of the main ways in which text operates in comics is to smooth over interstices, to create connections that the visual representation alone does not make clear. The function of text in comics is to fill in the gaps left by the images, the layout, and the sequences. (Postema, 79)

Some autobiographical comics heavily rely on verbal narration in text-boxes, without which the sequence of panels would be quite difficult to decipher (e.g. Harvey Pekar's work or Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*). Subscribers to the concept of a visual narrative grammar (e.g. Cohn 2021, 42–51) tend to avoid the genre and limit their text selection to comic strips and to »›Kirbyan‹ American Visual Language [,which] is most associated with the graphic system used in superhero comics from the United States« (2021, 5). Even if they accept the verbal as part of the medium's constitutive multimodality, which would require a significantly different approach (Tseng, Laubock and Pflaeging; Tseng and Bateman; Bateman, Wildfeuer and Hiippala), the very idea of a visual narrative grammar demands different priorities:

> Clearly, to account for the full architecture and comprehension of most visual narratives (like picture books or comics), we must address these multimodal interactions in full. However, without comprehensive understanding of the visual modality on its own, addressing their multimodal interaction with text will always remain limited. Thus, we here focus primarily on the comprehension of the visual modality. (Cohn 2021, 21; see 2019, 306)

Apart from visual narrative grammar, Cohn also offers a theory of narrative comprehension that is partly based on situation models (2021, 25, 38–42) and bears some resemblance to Catherine Emmott's theory of contextual frames (104, 121) and how they have to be updated by readers due to e.g. a shift in character configuration: »Narrative is usually defined as a succession of events but another important feature of narrative texts is that some or all of the events are described as they take place within a particular context. As a result, these events are ›brought to life‹ for the reader, being ›acted out‹ rather than presented in a summary form« (236). However, these clusters of narrative constituents are interpretative resources that change over time and require constant activation and testing: »My aim is to show that a context is not just there in ready-made form for the reader whenever the reader needs to draw on it, but that the reader is actively involved in constructing und updating contextual knowledge at the same time as focusing on events which are happening within that context« (18; see 36).

Instead of tracing characters across sentences by looking out for personal pronouns and other systems of reference, comics readers have to establish continuity across panels:

> To construe these units as a *sequence*, a comprehender must track elements across images and observe their changes. First, a comprehender must recognize that the characters and objects in one image are the same referential entities repeated in subsequent images […]. Thus, a continuity constraint guides a comprehender to recognize that each image does not depict different characters, but contains the same characters repeated across different images. (Cohn 2021, 16)

The significance of a change of state can only be judged in relation to the current state of affairs: »some differences in depiction may signal shifts in time, viewpoint, causal relationships, and construal of other alterations in states. Thus, an activity constraint characterizes the recognition that, insofar as elements repeat across images, differences in their depiction might cue an understanding of a change in state (temporal, causal, viewpoint, etc.)« (2021, 17). In contrast to Emmott, who limits herself to semantic processing and tracing the development of characters via their entanglements in specific contexts, Cohn adds Visual Narrative Grammar (VNG) on top of that, which I would characterize as a form of continuity editing applied to the panel sequences of comics. Certain patterns in the depiction of ongoing actions tend to be repeated across titles until a prototypical sequence of canonical functional panels can be abstracted (2021, 44).

What remains a constant across all these theories is the reader as a »co-producer of narrative meaning« and an »equal partner« (Stein, 131) in the construction of the narrative.

»Paradoxically, comics are so engaging and immersive exactly because they foreground the process of narration. In comics the implied reader is an especially strong construct due to the degree of ›involvement‹ that comics require of the reader« (Postema, 121). They »use their knowledge of actions, of causality, to fill in gaps temporarily, hermeneutically, where necessary adapting them as new information becomes available in the narrative« (107).

Postema observes that there are several layers of meaning beyond the more simplistic cause-effect structures of basic narratology: »Symbolic codes and intertextual codes add another layer of signification, building connotations on top of the purely denotational signification, and bringing in meanings that are not made visible in a straightforward way« (13). While Iser, Cohn or McCloud try to hedge in the interpretative freedom of readers by stressing the constraints that are built into the source material, Postema chooses to treat comics art as a playground without rules:

> *Parole*, or speech, includes the idiolect of the specific style of a writer. However, the idiosyncrasies of comics artists' idiolects go further: their main medium is not language that is bound by conventions of meaning and application, semantics and syntax. Instead, images communicate largely without rules. The repetition of language elements that we see in *parole* (phonemes, morphemes, phrases) do not really exist in comics images; the smallest elements of images have no set meanings, and the way these elements are combined or even repeated are not governed by rules like grammar. (xvi; see 3, 50, 57)

Cohn would beg to differ, as many elements of comics narration rely on the highly conventionalized use of graphic signs (2021, 6, 8, 11–13; see Bateman, Wildfeuer and Hiippala, 302). However, he does acknowledge that comics have their own idiosyncratic themes or tropes, so that familiarity with a specific work facilitates predictions and ultimately narrative comprehension (2021, 38). Based on her conviction that creators have a lot of freedom, Postema argues that comics establish their own rules and conventions at the beginning of the narrative to teach readers what to look out for: »what makes comics interesting is that their signification is often based on codes that establish their signification within the comic itself, signifying by convention according to the terms of that particular text« (22; see 120).

As has already been established, the recognition of characters across panels, based on resemblance and repetition (Mikkonen, 90; Postema, 57), is the primary way of making meaning, to which we can now add the recognition of themes, tropes, iconographies, idiosyncrasies and patterns of social interaction that readers have internalized about their favorite characters. This leads us to the final section of this introduction, which briefly looks at continuity across issues rather than panels.

According to the serial logic of superhero comics, the one element that ties them together is the protagonist, whose name, picture and iconography can be found on (almost) every cover (Stein and Etter, 129). Since these titles are created by different teams over many decades, gaps in the continuity are unavoidable. In his book chapter »Operational Seriality and

The Operation of Seriality«, Jason Mittell provides a good starting point for a discussion of a conundrum inherent to the genre, which is the tension between the promise of a single coherent saga and the reality of countless contradictions:

> We can elaborate each of these two necessary ingredients: continuity suggests long-form storytelling, repetition and reiteration, consistency and accumulation, historicity and memory, and potentials for transmedia expansion. Serial continuity connotes size and scope, suggesting that there is more to any story than can be consumed in a single sitting [...]. However, ›serial‹ is not simply a synonym for vast, as the whole must be segmented into instalments broken up by gaps, leading to temporal ruptures, narrative anticipation, moments for viewer productivity, opportunities for feedback between producers and consumers, and a structured system for a shared cultural conversation. Segmentation of a continuous whole is insufficient to produce seriality – the chapters in a book are no more a product of seriality than scenes in a film. What makes those segments serialised is when readers are forced to wait for the release of subsequent chapters, or when the next scenes of a film are withheld from viewers until a sequel. Serialised gaps are structured and unavoidable fissures that force readers or viewers to disengage from the narrative before moving onward. (228)

This opens up a space for fan cultures to become part of this ongoing negotiation of who these characters are and how their universes are meant to fit together (Stein, 138–40). Mittell identifies one of these »participatory practices« as »forensic fandom« (229), in which highly engaged fans scrutinize every bit of available information, but are also quite vocal about their views. This may be motivated by nostalgia for a past, often their own childhoods, when legendary creators produced the original stories, against which the most recent iterations have to compete: »So strong is the fans' identification of a series with the work by the original maker that a continuation becomes almost impossible unless it becomes acceptable to them. It is the conflict between the need to revive and the impossibility to do so that can make continuation such a fascinating chapter in the study of narrative and comics« (Baetens and Frey, 219).

The cultural impact of such diehard fans creates an almost insoluble dilemma for media conglomerates, as »every product of popular culture has to appeal to two types of readers at the same time. The ›naïve‹ one, who does not know the series as a whole and [...] is intrigued by the novelty and what seems to be creative innovation [...]; and the ›smart‹ one, who is capable of appreciation on a different level« (Stein and Etter, 129). This balancing act of pleasing two very different types of customers has led to a »reboot culture in US superheroes comics« (Baetens and Frey, 215), »resetting all of the storylines and even restarting the numbering of the new issues, [...] to streamline overly baroque storylines and character histories of long-running serials to allow new readers an easier entry into the storyworlds while offering experienced readers a new angle on familiar material« (Stein and Etter, 124). This type of »continuity management« (Kelleter qtd. in Stein and Etter, 130; see 133) generates its own problems, as it highlights the very instability it tries to overcome.

Mittell argues that »what makes something serialised is not its form, but how it is created, distributed, circulated, and consumed. Thus, seriality is best understood as a dynamic cul-

tural practice, rather than a stable formal element« (229; see Stein and Etter, 132). Through their feedback, fans become co-creators of TV shows and comics series, as the »gaps between instalments become productive sites of change and development« (Mittell, 229). These participatory practices or »readerly projections« (Stein, 138) may themselves contribute to the »inherent unruliness of serial storytelling, its essential unpredictability« (Stein and Etter, 136), even though fans are likely to suspect production issues to be the main source of infuriating inconsistencies and mistakes. These, in turn, spark an even more intense debate via letter columns, fanzines and now websites (Stein, 143).

After this cursory overview of how continuity may be conceptualized in comics narratives, it is now time to introduce the six contributions to this special issue of *CLOSURE* in terms of how they fit into this broad spectrum of interdisciplinary approaches.

Lukas Wilde's paper on ›essayistic comics‹ or ›illustrated essays‹ offers a counterbalance to the concept of narrativity, which has been largely taken for granted in this introduction. This genre deviates in two significant ways from what has been presented so far: first of all, the main function of essayistic comics is *not* to tell stories (Bateman, Wildfeuer and Hiippala, 296–297, 315–321) and, secondly, they heavily rely on verbal discourse, which I briefly touched upon in the context of certain autobiographical comics (Bechdel; Pekar). This has far-reaching consequences for the overall coherence of the text, as there is neither a consistent storyworld to speak of nor protagonists with their conflicts and character arcs. Wilde explores the implications of these tenets by discussing three examples, Lynda Barry's *Making Comics*, Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening* and Schlogger's online comics.

Barbara Eggert is next with a case study of Horst Stein's ›Haydn Cycle‹, which consists of a series of eight comics pages. In the promotional material of the Haydn birthplace in Rohrau, Lower Austria, for which it was created in close collaboration with the curator of the permanent exhibition, Werner Hanak-Lettner, it is referred to as a ›graphic novel‹. Here we encounter the fairly unique phenomenon that a comic was deliberately conceptualized as part of a non-linear, transmedial museum exhibition, including more or less explicit references to other exhibits, such as physical objects. The other parts of the Haydn family history in comics form are not even displayed in the same room, which means that visitors can only make sense of this storyline and encounter all the members of the family by physically transgressing the spatial ›gutters‹ between the exhibits.

In »*Invincible*: Multiscale Coherence in Comics« **J. Scott Jordan** and **Victor Dandridge, Jr.**, look more closely at how comics creators can instrumentalize readers' expectations by luring them into a false sense of security and predictability before strategically violating this trust to make them curious and engaged with the narrative. These expectation-surprise dynamics rely on the fact that readers are primed to make sense of new experiences – in this case a superhero comic – by relying on their memories and previous encounters with similar

texts. The authors explain that there is an educational benefit to this art of misdirection, as young readers are more willing to embrace such a form of discovery learning as long as they are ›hooked‹ on the narrative.

Mark Hibbett's contribution to this issue is a fascinating look at how the artist John Byrne used ›image quotation‹ to evoke key scenes from seminal storylines of *The Fantastic Four*, only to disrupt previous continuity by adapting the material to fit his own vision. This revised history was meant to correct ›mistakes‹ by other creators, but also to claim supreme ownership of these characters and storylines. By treating his own (recent) changes as the new canon, mostly through image quotation, he attempted to ›own‹ Dr. Doom and (re)shape readers' understanding of this character. This »process of retroactive meaning-making« (Stein, 142) highlights a typical dynamic of serialized comic book publication in that the ›mistakes‹ of the past are picked up, renegotiated and offered to the readers as supposedly permanent solutions or fixes, which naturally provoke even more elaborate debates about canonicity and legitimacy.

The complex inconsistencies generated by so-called superhero cross-over narratives are the topic of **Amadeo Gandolfo**'s subsequent paper. Grant Morrison's *Final Crisis* serves as the prime example of how these massive storylines may get derailed easily, not infrequently by editorial mandates, frustrating any hopes for consistency by foregrounding the fissures and contradictions they were meant to overcome. Gandolfo approaches this narrative collapse not so much from a structural point of view, but in the form of a cultural history of cross-over storylines and of *Final Crisis* in particular, acknowledging and exploring the difficult production process of such monumental endeavors that would require meticulous, long-term planning, but often have to be salvaged last-minute by seemingly haphazard rewrites or other improvised measures.

Stephan Packard gets to have the last word, as he skillfully manages to combine many of the concerns that have been addressed so far and discusses them in an integrated fashion. Jordan and Dandridge's expectation-surprise dynamics are revisited, here in the form of ›inferential revisions‹, but also Postema's idea that comics ›teach‹ their readership how they want to be interpreted, which is elaborated upon in the form of ›heautonomic rules‹. Furthermore, he addresses McCloud's theory of closure, conventions in superhero comics, reader responses, the interplay of words and images (multimodality), »Krafft's strongly hermeneutic but structurally linguistic theory of a comics grammar« etc. – it is all included in a neat package that rounds off this multifaceted exploration of coherence in comics.

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Essayistic Comics and Non-Narrative Coherence

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Introduction

In this paper, I am going to explore a rather neglected sub-form of comics that cannot adequately be described as narrative. This is highly relevant to all considerations of coherence in comics. *If* a comic is taken to be narrative, it *must* also be coherent on a global, multimodal level: The represented situations, events, and characters can be ›read‹ as located within a consistent storyworld (a diegesis or a possible world) then, based on interconnected temporal, spatial, causal, and ontological relations. The narrativity of comics has, of course, repeatedly been challenged in recent decades, but mostly concerning abstract works (see Casper and Howaldt; Grünewald; Rommens et al.). Less attention has been paid to comics, that do – on a global, multimodal level – neither present (fictional or non-fictional) events, situations, or sequences of actions, nor show individual existents (characters or objects). Instead, they employ various forms of interrelations, juxtapositions, and tensions between ›comic-like‹ pictures and verbal essays. They present theses, formulate arguments, or reflect on thematic relations mainly through written discourses.[1] In comics – being a multimodal media form containing pictures – these verbal arguments and reflections are usually contextualized, symbolized, metaphorized, or contrasted through a pictorial ›track‹, but the respective images cannot be related to the spatio-temporal continuum of a »basic facts domain« (Margolin 2007, 71) or a »unified narrative space« (Gavaler, 157). I have discussed this before (Wilde 2017) with respect to specific webcomics (especially *The Oatmeal* by Matthew Inman) and I would now extend these observations to a larger corpus of works by Lynda Barry (2008; 2019), Nick Sousanis, and Schlogger (Johanna Baumann). I am going to analyze all three authors across their considerable differences with regard to prototypical (and, as I shall show, narrative) comics, as I think that their works all deviate in a specific way from the ›regular‹ procedures of generating (narrative) coherence in comics.

Comics that generate coherence not through diegetic pictures, but mainly through a verbal track have occasionally been recognized as important to comics, but mostly only in passing. Chris Gavaler's monumental *The Comics Form*, for instance, does not dedicate more than half a page of his meticulously developed 210 pages to »linguistic coherence« (126–127). Similarly, only short passages can be found on »Verb Dominance« in Neil Cohn (311) or »word-specific« picture-word relationships in Scott McCloud (153). The reason for this curious lack of theoretical reflection seems clear: The sort of coherence I am going to describe in this contribution does not only seem *unusual* within comic studies, it even undermines comics' formal definition and conceptual ›essence‹ (understood as, for instance, pictorial sequentiality) to varying degrees. I would argue, however, that a confusion of comics poetics (what they *should* be as an idealized form) and theory (how we can describe all actual works most comprehensively) is detrimental to a study of more recent developments in works clearly identified as comics. I am going to reflect upon that a little bit more in my conclusion. For now, however, I merely want to point to the sheer range of works – and their considerable *differences* in terms of publication form, typical readership, cultural capital, and complexity – to foreground their similarities with respect to non-narrative coherence. I am going to propose the heuristic term of *essayistic coherence* and *essayistic comics* for this discussion, for reasons I would like to make transparent.

Since my approach essentially departs from a *lack* of narrative coherence, I draw especially on transmedial narratology (see Elleström; Ryan and Thon; Thon) and Gavaler's recent *Comics Form*, borrowing some concepts and perspectives from discussions of the »essay-film« in film studies (Pantenburg). This media-comparative analogy builds on the following similarities: The *Kieler Lexikon der Filmbegriffe* [dictionary of film concepts, University of Kiel] refers to the essay film as the »intellectual brother of the documentary« (Bender and Brunner, n. pag.; my translation), since it is understood as a form of argumentation instead of narration (see Bellour). According to art historian Barbara Filser, essayistic media texts »become recognizable not as a seemingly self-narrating story [without any identifiable narrator], but as discourse« (Filser, 98; my translation). At the same time, an »essayistic subjectivity« of the respective artists is continuously foregrounded as a »content-determining and form-giving instance« (97; my translation). We could then look out for a special sort of coherence that operates on a conceptual-abstract rather than on a narrative-specific level. ›Argumentative‹ coherence could certainly also be approached via text-linguistic criteria for what is called a ›text type‹ or a ›text class‹ (narrative, argumentative, descriptive, persuasive, etc., see Malmkjær, 259). This would certainly be worthwhile, but it cannot be done in the present paper, as my aims are more modest. *Essayistic coherence* is instead proposed as a heuristic and rather broad umbrella term that, nevertheless, can be sharply distinguished from narrative coherence – conceptually, as well as with regard to actual comics expressions. Essayistic or non-narrative coherence could then be defined as follows: Unlike narrative coherence,[2] essayistic

coherence does not require any identity of recurring, individual characters, things, places, or events in time and space on the global, multimodal level of a comic text. The coherence created instead is facilitated mainly through the verbal track which again does not represent any consistent global storyworld. Just as in (purely verbal or film) essays, the verbal track can oscillate between many different discursive and rhetorical forms and textual functions (for instance, reflecting upon theoretical terms, discussing conceptual relations, or presenting arguments) which will remain undefined for the present purposes – except for its *lack* of overall narrative coherence. Next, I am going to discuss this absence for the three artists proposed above by introducing and reflecting on, step by step, (base-)narrativity, allegory, and pictogrammatics/diagrammatics in detail. In my conclusions, I will then discuss the broader issues merely touched upon in this introduction, namely, how to reconcile essayistic (non-narrative) coherence with comics' multimodal division of labor, with authorial subjectivity, with our understanding of comics' ›form‹ vs. ›medium‹, or, in short: with the *mediality* of comics.

Reflecting with Lynda Barry on (Base-)Narrativity

Let us have a look at the works of Lynda Barry first, specifically at her newest book, *Making Comics* (2019). The highly celebrated work poses as a material simulacrum of a sketchbook: a collage of handwriting, scribbles, and many kinds of inserts that together form what could be called an instruction manual for a creative drawing class. It is, in fact, composed after an actual curriculum that she created as a 2019 MacArthur Fellow. Still, *Making Comics* opens rather poetically with the following written words: »There was a time when drawing and writing were not separated for you. In fact, our ability to write could only come from our willingness and inclination to draw. In the beginning of our writing and reading lives we *drew* the letters of our name« (1).

Fig. 1: Barry 2019, 1.

These anthropological ›primal scenes‹ are initially devoid of any pictorial illustrations. Instead, the page emphasizes the hand-written quality of the letters (see Kashtan, 23–53). The verbal ›story‹, if we want to call it that at all, could perhaps be taken as some sort of ›minimal narrative‹: the backstory of an unspecified collective »we«, representing the whole human race. There was a *before* and an *after* the (vaguely defined) ›event‹ of growing up and ›unlearning‹ drawing. Barry soon abandons this collective identity altogether in favor of even more general reflections and, especially, a series of questions and instructions for »you«, the implied reader: »When very young kids draw, they cause the lines that cause something to appear. It is there to be found in the same way you found the fish in the drawing above. When you knew they were there, you saw them. But what was there before that?« (2). These iterations of rhetorical questions are even more pronounced in her earlier work, *What It Is* (2008), winner of an Eisner Award for »Best Reality Based Graphic Novel«. It alternates between collages of questions and instructions, on the one hand: »You can write about all kinds of things. Think of something that you want to share. Write it here. Remember to print today's date. What happens when we put words together?« (31); and written diary entries accompanied by occasional illustrations of what seems to be her childhood self, on the other hand: »If Playing isn't happiness or fun, if it is something which may lead to those things or to something else entirely, NOT being able to play IS misery« (52).

Relating these examples to more general narratological perspectives, we could certainly ask with Umberto Eco whether *every* text (also this one you are reading right now) could be conceived of – in a very basic sense – as a narrative account about »a (grammatically implied) agent, that is, /ego/, who performs the act of understanding or uttering, and in doing so passes from a confused state of consciousness to a clearer consciousness« (1987, 137; my translation).[3] But this, of course, would not amount to a very useful concept of narrativity. »[T]he insistence on *temporality* is part of every definition of narrativity, regardless of its philosophical orientation« (Steiner, 149; my emphasis; see Abbott 2014 for more detail). For

Fig. 2: Barry 2008, 52.

transmedial applications, the fixation on temporal changes of state has perhaps proven too narrow if we are primarily interested in the constitution of a storyworld (a possible world or a diegetic domain) in which changes of state can take place. A range of recent works (see e.g. Veits, Wilde and Sachs-Hombach) have abandoned the earlier conceptual distinction between ›spatial arts‹ and ›temporal arts‹ derived from Gotthold E. Lessing, which is undermined by comics' multimodal blending and frequent hybridization of words and pictures anyway. The »widespread opposition between verbal and visual media types is simply a false and hence utterly misleading dichotomy« (Elleström, 47). Many authoritative works have instead argued for the inherent (or at least feasible) narrativity of even wordless single pictures. Simon Grennan, for instance, found that,

> [w]hen I make a representation, the object of the representation appears in a distinct time. This time is brought into being by everything that is explicitly represented, that is, told or shown […]. This time exists in a wider diegetic frame of other temporal events, because […] what is told/shown has causes and consequences, even though these remain untold or unrepresented. (149)

Put even more concisely: Even a »depiction of a single scene (say, Constable's painting *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*) always has both [*sic*] a story time, a post-story time and a pre-story time« (Grennan, 152). Chris Gavaler has recently proven the analytical power, if not the theoretical necessity of such an approach in great detail (15–32), concluding that »[t]he shapes of the ink marks [in comics or other pictures …] require a viewer to interpret them and so co-produce their representational content mentally. When viewers interpret physical qualities, they experience a diegesis« (19). If we follow Mary-Laure Ryan's widely accepted transmedial definition of narrativity, it amounts to a bundle of prototypical features, or a »fuzzy set« (2007, 28). The (selective) representation of a spatiotemporal, local situation – within a possible world, a diegesis – is at its center. Ryan outlines this set as follows:

> (1) a spatial constituent consisting of a world (the setting) populated by individuated existents (characters and objects); (2) a temporal constituent, by which this world undergoes significant changes caused by non-habitual events […]; (3) a mental constituent, specifying that the events must involve intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world (or to the mental states of other agents). (2014, 475)

These three components must be the foundation of all ›narrativity-enhancing‹ elements later on (which especially include represented or implied temporalities and causalities). Nevertheless, a (more or less) *explicit* representation of temporality and causality is still considered crucial for the assessment of narrativity in many fields (see, for instance, Lars Elleström's recent definition of a story, »which should be understood as the scaffolding core of a narrative, […] circumscribed as represented events that are temporally interrelated in a meaningful way«, 35). To reconcile these two strands of recent narrative theory, I have proposed the

term *base-narrativity* for the constitution of Ryan's prototypical core (or Gavaler's discourse-diegesis distinction): the semiotic establishment of a spatio-temporal domain of particular objects and/or characters located in a possible world distinct from the representational material (see Wilde 2017; 2018, 221–269; 2020c). Base-narrativity might not (yet) constitute a plot or a story – whatever our definition of both may be – but certainly of a diegesis, of a diegetic situation distinguished from the pictorial material.

Little or no potential for base-narrativity, in contrast, can be found, in »representations of abstract entities and entire classes of concrete objects, scenarios involving ›the human race‹, ›reason‹, ›the state‹, ›atoms‹, ›the brain‹, etc.« (Ryan 2007, 29). Ellestrom also reasons that, if narrativity must entail »existents and events« (77), then »[t]his largely excludes communication that is not primarily about what goes on in a physical place inhabited by concrete entities but is rather about more abstract notions« (78). While he also considers more abstract, non-material (or non-spatial) ›existents‹, such as mental states or social collectives, these must still be *located within* a spacetime-continuum (a diegesis) to experience temporal transformations (and thus undergo events). As Gavaler (157) put it aptly: »The absence of a diegetic world peopled by characters performing actions in settings would seem to preclude narrative«. If we compare Barry's works with McCloud's meta-comics, the avatar of the latter constitutes a distinct ›bubble‹ of base-narrativity that Barry's verbal account is missing (if we do not want to attribute base-narrativity to *every* account of a »(grammatically implied) agent, that is, /ego/« in the sense of Eco once again). This difference – based on whether an enunciative situation constitutes base-narrativity by itself – can then be traced back to a question stated lucidly by Jan-Noël Thon, namely, »to what extent the narrating situation is represented as part of the diegetic primary storyworld, which, in turn, usually boils down to the question of whether the narrating situation is represented« (158).

Pictorial avatars like McCloud's always do this, to some extent, while purely verbal discourse, such as Barry's presented above, can choose to self-represent and locate an utterer within a storyworld – or not. But, of course, even if single pictures typically always establish a diegetic situation and thus base-narrativity within their surrounding frames,[4] the range and ›stability‹ of this diegetic domain can vary considerably. Base-narrativity of individual pictures does not always lead to base-narrativity (and especially not narrativity proper) on a global, multimodal level – and thus not to narrative coherence of a comic as a whole. Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening* is highly interesting in this respect.

Reflecting with Nick Sousanis on Allegory

Not only is *Unflattening's* ›comicity‹ (see Beinike) beyond question, Sousanis' panels clearly *do* represent spatio-temporal situations without recourse to any narrating avatar-character.

The book opens up with the following words: »Like a great weight descending, suffocating and ossifying, flatness permeates the landscape« (5).

Right on the next page, it becomes clear that ›flatness‹ is merely a metaphor in his general verbal discourse: »This flatness is not literal (though we will take that up shortly) --- It is a flatness of sight, a contraction of possibilities« (6). Nevertheless, the pictorial track (see fig. 3) *does* present a spatiotemporal domain that – by itself – could be taken as a storyworld, somewhat similar to the one introduced by Jorge Luis Borges in his short story *The Library of Babel* from 1941, containing »all that is able to be expressed, in every language« (115). The library, which is very similar to Sousanis' initial pictorial representations, has a precise spatial architecture, »composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries« (112). The story certainly has an allegorical, rather than a merely mimetic (fantastic) meaning. It is perhaps a metaphor for the ›universe of texts‹, or a reflection on meaning vs. arbitrariness, or simply on complexity (although countless other interpretations have been proposed; see Basile). Any such reading must first be based on the imagination of an actual, physical spacetime setting in which characters *exist* and make *experiences* within it. Borges'

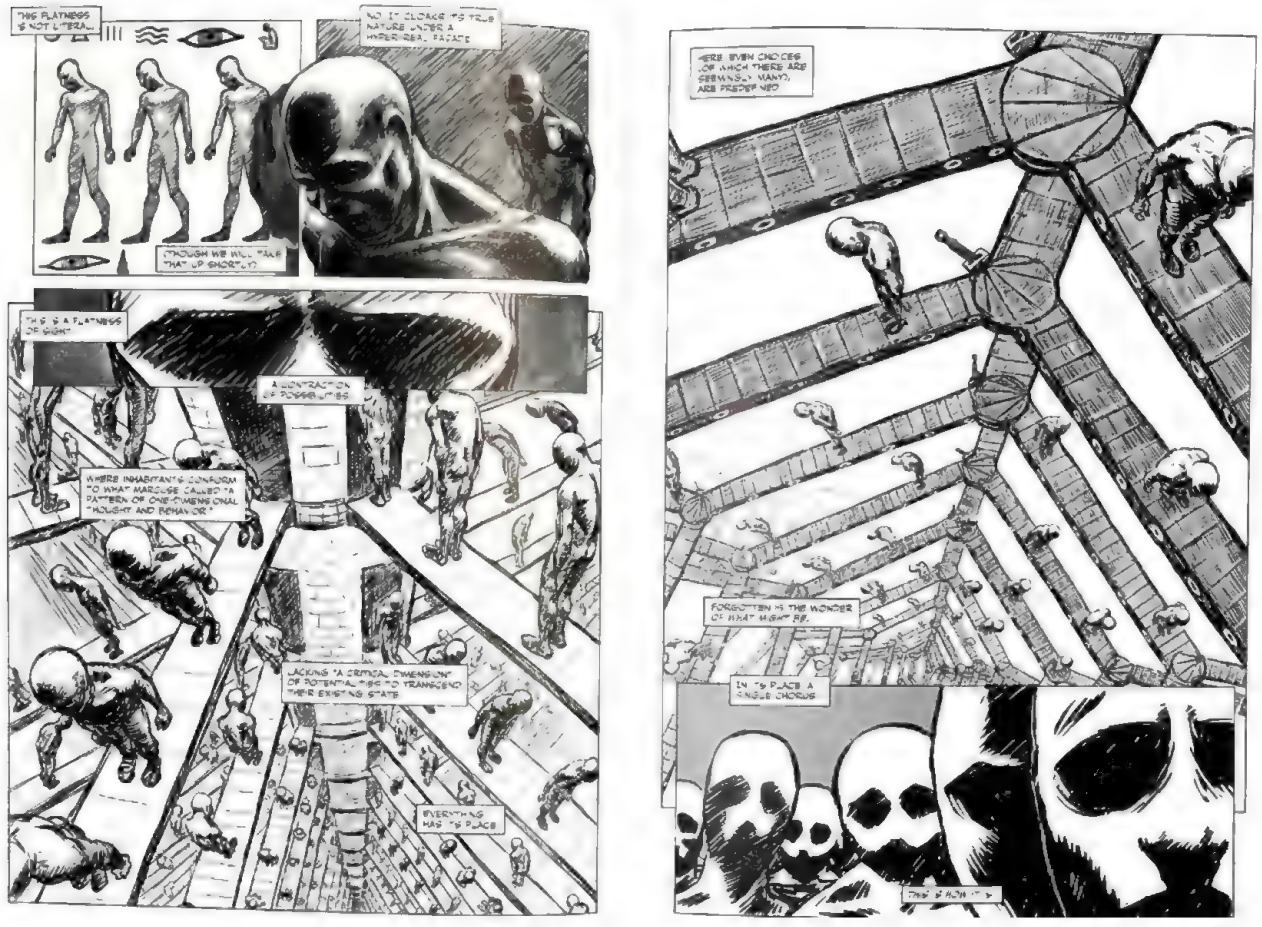

Fig. 3: Sousanis 2015, 6–7.

unnamed, homodiegetic narrator, for instance, writes: »in my younger days I traveled […]. Now that my eyes can hardly make out what I myself have written, I am preparing to die, a few leagues from the hexagon where I was born« (112). Narrative and abstract topics thus continuously feed back into each other through allegory as the ›relay‹. An even more obvious example of this feedback loop between narration and abstraction is Plato's »Allegory of the Cave«, the opening of Book VII of *The Republic* from 375 BC. The section is often defined as »a symbolic narrative that can be interpreted as having a hidden meaning« (McAleer, 211). The text *does* create its philosophical arguments with recourse to a specific storyworld situation of complex spatial relations (there's an interior and an exterior, light projections bouncing off of puppets of various materials, etc.), antagonistic groups of characters (one keeping the others chained and imprisoned for some reason) that possess intentionality and an inner life (believing wrongly that the world is nothing but the shadows of those artifacts), and its »tellability« (Baroni) even centers around a decisive *narrative event* (one prisoner breaks free and experiences an epiphany).

To account for these narrative representations *within* non-narrative discourses, Thon's distinction between two areas of representation is helpful. On the one hand, we are dealing with (›locally‹) depicted situations, which can be located within (›globally‹) depicted worlds (storyworlds) on the other hand (see Thon, 46–56). While every local situation must, by definition, always be located within a global storyworld that is at least *implied*, not all represented local situations can then be related to *the same* storyworld. Even within ›regular‹ narrative texts, any hypo-diegesis (a story-within-a-story) introduces a narrative distinction between ontological levels. In order to construct a storyworld on a global textual level, readers must infer the spatial, temporal, causal, and ontological relations between all locally represented situations. This then amounts to what David Herman called »mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate« (9). Jan Baetens has argued convincingly that non-narrative (what he calls »abstract« comics) include not only works that do not feature any representational (figurative) images, but also those whose pictorial scenes can no longer be assigned to any spatiotemporal continuum in which the depicted objects would have an individuated or particularized existence. »Abstract's opposite is not only ›figurative‹ or ›representational‹ but also […] ›narrative‹. Abstraction seems to be what resists narrativization, and conversely narrativization seems to be what dissolves abstraction« (Baetens, 95). Similarly, Thierry Groensteen has developed an extensive typology of »infra-narrative« relations between pictures that cannot be considered narrative, connected via a coherent storyworld (although certainly base-narrative on their own: each picture does show a represented situation within a possible world). In narrative works, all diegetic sub-domains are coherently relative to a basic facts domain or a unified narrative space in which the narrative participants (characters and objects) are re-identifiable.[5] While a storyworld is a complex spatiotemporal structure of situations, it is

also possible to speak about it propositionally (i.e. making acceptable or unacceptable statements). As Uri Margolin put it: »[A]ny narrative, regardless of its lengths, is a macro speech act of the constative type, claiming that such and such happened« (2014, 647). This is independent of whether or not they are presented as fictional or non-fictional.

Borges' library generates such a (fantastic) basic fact domain, a unified narrative space. Its metaphorical meanings are accessed in no other way than with any other literary *subtext*: through interpretation. Plato's cave or Sousanis' *landscape permeated by flatness*, in contrast, frequently abandon all base-narrativity (global narrative coherence), all spatio-temporal referentiality, for entirely extra-diegetic discourse. In *The Republic*, a dialogue between Glaucon and his mentor Socrates about matters of politics, education, and knowledge frames the allegory. We could perhaps take the representation of these two ›talking heads‹ as the narrative basic fact domain and the cave as an embedded hypo-diegesis – just as McCloud's avatar anchors all reflections of *Understanding Comics* within a ›bubble‹ of base-narrativity: ›there is this guy and he goes on talking about comics‹. Sousanis constructs no such ›anchor‹ for his extra-diegetic, disembodied voice in caption boxes. It often also does not narrate at all but presents abstract reflections such as: »Languages are powerful tools for exploring the ever greater depth of our understanding. But for all their strengths, languages can also become traps« (52). Yet, the base-narrativity *lacking* in these sentences on the verbal track is often added through the pictorial track: by base-narrative representations of little people ›in boxes within boxes‹ (see fig. 3); through storyworld situations depicting – or modeled after – Edwin Abbot's novel *Flatland*, in which a character inhabits a 2D world; through non-fictional representations of Eratosthenes of Alexandria calculating the circumference of the Earth; and through countless others (see, for instance, Sousanis, 32, 93). Many of these only ›pop up‹ for individual panels, however. While these panels could be taken as representations of local storyworld situations within an implied global storyworld (and hence, as base-narrative), they are not spatio-temporally, causally, or ontologically connected to each other. There is simply no basic fact domain, no unified narrative space of diegetic cohesion on a macro-textual level: the countless ›micro-storyworlds‹ emerge and disappear throughout his treatise. They are only made legible through his verbal account, which is often neither narrative *nor* base-narrative, as it does not state any facts about a »world populated by individuated existents« (Ryan 2014, 475). If we wanted to maintain that *Unflattening*'s reflections were *always* about a world, our world (and hence base-narrative throughout), then only in the ubiquitous sense that *all* essays or philosophical reflections (also the present text here) claim to be *about our world* in some sense, but not necessarily about particulars in time and space. Often, even Sousanis' pictures abandon base-narrativity altogether. This is the case when he introduces diagrams that are intended as representations of mere relations between abstract terms and concepts: »Consider: Similarity, difference. Proximity, distance, structural organization, and its lack« (Sousanis, 75).

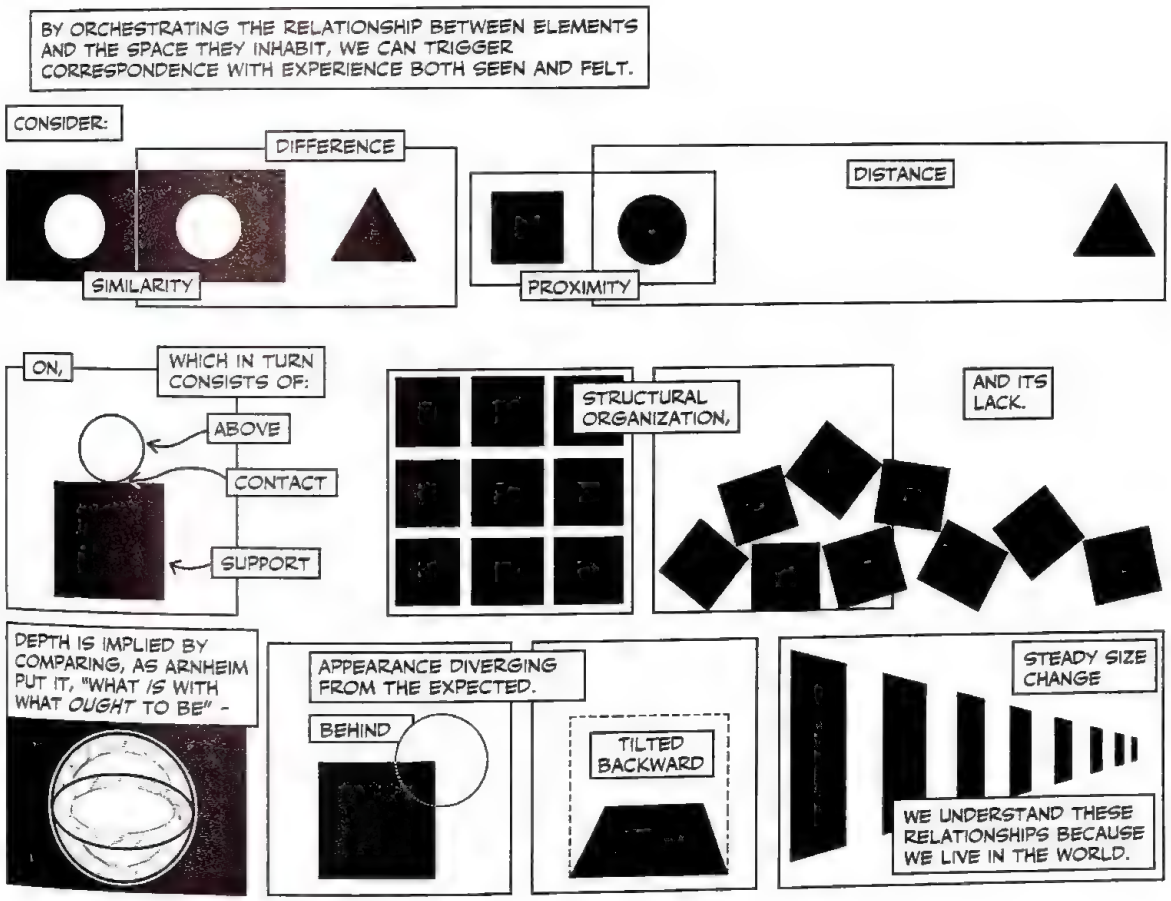

Fig. 4: Sousanis 2015, 75.

Figure 4 employs diagrammatic iconicity devoid of any figurative or diegetic (base-narrative) meaning. The shapes and contours represent only themselves, or more precisely: they exemplify physical features that the lines on paper actually possess (see Wilde 2019 for a more detailed discussion). To quote Gavaler (16) once more: »[A] representational image is both the subject matter simulated (diegesis) and the physical substance that simulates (discourse). More simply, a representational image has both form and content, while a non-representational image has form only«. Even a representational image that *has* content, however – we see a represented object, for instance – can be used in the same way without the establishment of base-narrativity. For verbal language, this is indisputable: The written sign ›CATS‹ is *not only* non-narrative (because it does *not* present changes of state or any sort of temporality). Much more importantly, it does not refer to any particular event or thing (such as a cat) that belongs to a distinct possible (non-fictional or fictional) world. The written sign ›CATS‹ (without being part of any proposition) does not afford base-narrativity on its own. Instead, it refers to the level of the linguistic dictionary (see Eco 1984, 255). Exempt from all referential uses (within a dictionary, or perhaps as graffiti art), the sign remains separated from (even fictional) extensionality. Pictures can also operate on this level, and we use them quite

frequently in this way when they are employed as pictograms or ideograms. I would like to show that by using Schlogger's webcomic strips as illustrations/examples of ›small forms‹ of essayistic (non-narrative) coherence in comics where even pictoriality often abandons all base-narrativity.

Reflecting with Schlogger on Pictogrammatics and Diagrammatics

Johanna Baumann, aka Schlogger, is certainly among the most important German webcomic artists today. In 2013, she was awarded the webcomic prize »Lebensfenster«. In April 2017, her contributions to the German webcomic scene were also recognized with an ICOM Award for Special Achievements. Schlogger's print publications include a bachelor's thesis in comics form published by Panini (Schlogger 2012). Professionally, she offers – among other services – »graphic recordings« of workshops, lectures, and meetings. A graphic recording provides explanatory visuals, diagrammatics, and pictogrammatics that contextualize the content of a conversation (see Schlogger n.d.). In a similar vein, she creates diary-like posts on her comics blog and via her social media accounts that present creative snapshots of thought processes about current events and topics. From April 2018 onwards, for instance, she reflected on her pregnancy (Schlogger 2018), not only through a comics diary (which entails many autobiographical *narrative* passages) but also through short comics essays presenting and discussing topics and controversies surrounding motherhood and child education.

In Figure 5, for instance, we see an illustration of Gary Chapman's *The 5 Love Languages*. Chapman's central idea is that »Words of affirmation«, »Physical Touch«, »Receiving Gifts«, »Quality Time«, and »Acts of

Fig. 5: Schlogger 2021c.

Service« are parallel forms of communication between parents and their children. Schlogger then points out how miscommunication occurs and how people feel neglected when their attention is not focused on the same ›language‹. The first five illustrations show strongly abstracted human figures that can be understood as pictograms or ideograms. Most semiotic and analytical-philosophical understandings of the pictogram do not focus on questions of design and aesthetics but on specific semantics. When we use a picture pictogrammatically, we want it to be understood not as a depiction of a specific object but as a generalized sign standing for a whole class of objects (see Kjørup; Scholz, 131–133; Wilde 2020a). This means that the pictoriality of a pictogram is relevant only in *one* single property (or in the common sum of *all* its properties), namely that it allows recipients to infer a conceptual category such as ›men's room‹ or ›beverages‹ (see Sachs-Hombach, 207–212). The further recipients move away from linguistic base levels (instead of ›apple‹, ›fruit‹, or even more generally: ›food‹), the more *ideogrammatically* (instead of pictogrammatically) the sign is used. Signs prohibiting the consumption of food and beverages in trains, for instance, depict only exemplary items of food, which, however, also stand for other objects of the same, more abstract category ideogrammatically. In the following, I am going to use ›pictogram‹ as an umbrella term for pictures which might also be interpreted more ideogrammatically.

The pictogrammatic potential of pictures in comics can, first, contribute to additional thematic layers of interpretation: »An antique grandfather clock and a digital watch are discursively dissimilar while still representing objects belonging to the same diegetic category« (Gavaler, 94). More interesting for our purposes are cases where there are *no* corresponding diegetic objects within a unified narrative space (transporting such secondary thematic meanings) to begin with. Pictogrammatics are, in fact, mostly discussed in comics theory with respect to »emanata« (see Gavaler, 44–46): If we see a picture of a lightbulb over a character's head, it does not (usually) mean that there is a physical object of that appearance within the storyworld (the diegesis), but that a character experiences a sudden realization. Not only is its diegetic meaning conventional, the specific appearance of the pictogram is largely irrelevant to its diegetic meaning as it only communicates the proposition (the narrative fact) *that* a psychological event takes place (see Wilde 2020b). Pictograms, however (or, more precisely, pictogrammatically employed pictorial signs), can also be used *without* any diegetic situation at all (›anchoring‹ them as a subjectivized expression, for instance). This is the case in figure 5. Schlogger's pictogrammatic signs create visual ciphers for the respective »five languages«, or perhaps for people currently focused on one of them. No specific storyworld situation comes into play. Of course, we are always free to imagine one (with ample room for imaginative gap-filling), just as we are always able to abstract any diegetic situation to create an exemplified type. Pictorial signs never entirely determine their signification with regard to individualization vs. generalization. Some toilet doors using photographs of male/female movie stars exemplify their pictogrammatic meaning through individual ›tokens‹,

and these exemplifications *could* be regarded as constituting a base-narrative. We are free to focus on the specific situation the photograph was taken in, which has a *before* and an *after*. Nevertheless, within the context of use, the ›message‹ of the communication can clearly guide our attention toward one side or the other, as can the chosen aesthetics. A strongly abstracted visual style will usually afford a pictogrammatic ›reading‹ more readily. If this means that the distinction between pictogrammatics vs. diegetic pictures is never a clear-cut one, as pictoriality always affords both interpretations to a certain degree, then base-narrativity can never be entirely disregarded for pictorial representations (Even a lightbulb in a comic could be taken as a representation of a physical object within a base-narrative context, for example if the character was imagining a lightbulb, relegating the bulb to a subjective hypo-diegesis. It would be hard to find narrative support for such an interpretation, though). At the very least, however, Schlogger's illustration does not establish a global storyworld in which the individual ›characters‹ (the pictogrammatic figures) are spatio-temporally, causally, or ontologically related to each other. Coherence is only provided through the verbal discourse, which is not narrative or base-narrative, but only presents theories of how communication works (in ›our‹ world or in any other).

Another example (see Schlogger 2021b) illustrates a video essay by German science journalist Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim about common misconceptions concerning ›hypocrisy‹ when it comes to environmental protection (see maiLab 2017). Usually, Mai Thi's argument goes, the hypocrite who only *claims* to care about the environment (but then secretly throws garbage into the woods) is judged much more harshly by society than a person who is ›upright‹ about not caring at all. There is a logical fallacy in this, Mai Thi and Schlogger point out, because the environment does not care about ›hypocrisy‹ at all, so the hypocrite at least contributes somewhat to the good cause, while the ›honest culprit‹ actively encourages environmental damage. The three respective figures that Schlogger uses to exemplify both positions are not specific characters, but representations of types, so the drawings operate pictogramatically again. Yet, they *could* be taken as base-narrative (and hence as characters within a local storyworld situation serving only as examples), but the global, mainly verbal coherence cannot.

Just as Sousanis, Schlogger also works with diagrammatics quite often. In figure 6, she illustrates that many problematic dogmas about childcare that are still prevalent today (that it was ›healthy‹ to let a baby cry without coming to their aid, for instance) are actually derived from a notorious book popular during German National Socialism that still lingers unconsciously within cultural memory. The illustration shows a simplified drawing of Johanna Haarer's *Die Deutsche Mutter und ihr erstes Kind* from 1934 (»The German Mother and her First Child«, Haarer 1961). The drawing is clearly not a representation of any individual copy (in any base-narrative context), but the whole ›work‹ in all its editions. A pictogrammatic reading is thus strongly encouraged. What is more, the pictogrammatic representation is not even situated in represented space, but within a diagram. It seems to conceptualize the

cultural consciousness where Haarer's book is below some critical threshold of awareness (represented through ocean waves), but still sending messages ›upwards‹ along a Y-axis labeled »generational telephone game« [Generationenflüsterpost]. The representational space thus blends a temporal dimension (generations succeeding each other) with a conceptual one (degrees of conscious awareness).

Fig. 6: Schlogger 2021a.

As I have laid out elsewhere in more detail (see Wilde 2019), diagrammatic iconicity has become one of the most productive fields of experiments within comic book narration, perhaps because the drawn line is indifferent to the distinction between perceptual and diagrammatic iconicity (In live-action film, in contrast, diagrams are always distinguished from the photographic imagery by necessity; see Ernst). While perceptual iconicity represents tangible ›things‹ situated in time and space, diagrammatic iconicity reduces ›things‹ (or ›states of affairs‹ that were *abstract* from the beginning) to cognitive relations and represents these by visual means: »The ›objects‹ of diagrammatic depiction are always relations and proportions« (Krämer, 31). Just like pictograms can be employed as emanata to represent narrative facts about characters, diagrammatic representations can be ›anchored‹ in regular storyworlds. They are frequently employed in works ranging from Fabrice Neaud's *Journal 2*, via Jonathan Hickman's *The Nightly News*, to Kevin Huizenga's *The River at Night*, Craig Thompson's *Habibi*, or the famous *Hawkeye*-issue »Pizza is my Business« by Matt Fraction and David Aja. In Schlogger's case, however, there is again no *global* storyworld providing spatio-temporal, causal, and ontological coherence (except for the ubiquitous sense that *all* texts are about our world in some sense, just like the present text here). This abandonment of a global diegetic domain has interesting consequences for the multimodal ›division of labor‹ between writing and a (*pictogrammatic* and *diagrammatic*) form of imagery that I want to reflect upon in the context of my concluding thoughts on the relevance of the essayistic (non-narrative) coherence with regard to the mediality of comics in general.

Reflecting on Essayistic Coherence and the Mediality of Comics

When reference to a *global* basic fact domain, to a unified narrative space of individual things (narrative coherence), is not possible or breaks down, the regular communicative situation of comics changes fundamentally. First, although this is purely terminological, if Barry, Sousanis, and Schlogger do not establish any global diegesis – whether fictional or non-fictional – their drawings and writings cannot be attributed to ›narrators‹ (but, perhaps, to implied authors instead of the actual artists, although I see no reason for any such differentiation here). Any narrator can only be determined relative to the global diegetic *primary storyworld* they constitute (see Thon, 155). What is more, when we encounter pictogrammatic and ideogrammatic images, the conventionalized medial transparency of comics that seems to provide ›glances into‹ a diegetic world breaks down as well (see Gavaler, 46–50). If there simply is *no* spatiotemporal domain that the pictures grant access to (on a global textual level), then we *must* take note of an authorial agency outside of the individual base-narrative local situations that wants to signify or communicate *something* to us on a conceptual level – something that the pictorial track only exemplifies, illustrates, or contrasts.

This is another reason why the term ›essayistic‹ has been suggested for this non-narrative form of coherence. In an essayistic film, Filser argues, a medial articulation »becomes legible not as a seemingly self-narrating story, but as discourse« (Filser, 98, my translation). At the same time, it highlights a specific authorial subjectivity (see Corrigan, 80–130) that we are more willing to overlook in ›transparent‹ narrative representations. The essayistic is then not a ›genre‹ of comics – it is not recognized as such at all to my knowledge – but more precisely a sort of articulation that continuously undermines not only genre boundaries themselves, but also conventional media boundaries (see Gavaler, 11–12; Elleström, 51–53, Wilde 2021). Essayistic comics, oscillating between locally represented situations and pictogrammatic exemplifications, both connected only through verbal discourse, represent »intermedia« in Stephan Packard's (2016) sense (building on Dick Higgins). They question the individual media form's conventional reading protocols within visual culture, both in terms of an unfamiliar ›division of labor‹ between the written and the verbal, as well as in terms of media boundaries. We can, and perhaps even should ask to what extent my chosen examples correspond to established formal definitions of comics as ›sequential images‹.

The discussed works by Barry, Sousanis, and Schlogger position themselves very differently in contrast to prototypical »comicness« (Miodrag) or »comicity« (Beinike) – up to the point where we might even exclude them from formal definitions of comics entirely. Lynda Barry is certainly considered one of the most important comics artists today, but her works, especially her newest book *Making Comics*, could perhaps be defined as an illustrated book *about* comics – rather than a comic itself (it was in fact nominated for an Eisner Award for »Best Comics-*Related* [!] Book«, but also as a »Great Graphic Novel for Teens« by the Young Adult Library Services Association). In contrast, no one would deny *Unflattening's* status as

a comic – although reviewers note that Sousanis »pushes the form of graphic narration to its limits« (Pietrzak-Franger, Packard and Schwertfeger, 12; my translation). Schlogger's webcomics occupy an interesting middle position: she clearly identifies as a comics artist and her works are, to my knowledge, fully accepted as such by practitioners, although formally, she is much closer to Barry than to Sousanis.

The *conventional* understanding of ›comics‹, in any case, is drastically changing at the present moment. Webcomic artists increasingly publish illustrated essays (such as Schlogger's) *as comics* more and more in recent years. These works often merit their ›label‹ – their comicity – through the incorporation of other comic conventions below or beyond picture sequentiality and narrative coherence (cartoonish drawings, speech bubbles, comicitious pictograms, and so on). Considerably more ›highbrow‹ graphic novel artists like Barry also rely on the same essayistic, non-narrative coherence more and more often. Eleanor Davis' *Why Art?*, Nora Krug's *Belonging*, Liv Strömquist's *Im Spiegelsaal* [Inne i spegelsalen], Katja Klengel's *Girlsplaining*, or Lisa Frühbeis' *Busengewunder*, all published within the last five years, immediately come to mind. Perhaps not accidentally these works all represent female and/or feminist voices using comics (as a ›medium‹) in inventive formal ways in service of an essayistic expression.

Meta-comics (like those of Sousanis), in contrast, certainly *do* fall under established formal definitions of comics (another beautiful, more recent example, aside from McCloud, would be Enrique del Rey Cabero, Michael Goodrum, and Josean Morlesín Mellado's *How to Study Comics and Graphic Novels. A Graphic Introduction to Comic Studies*), as do educational comics like David Vandermeulen and Daniel Casavane's recent adaptation of Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*. Any description of their strategies could also profit from a more thorough conception of ›essayistic‹, as they abandon global storyworld coherence frequently as well. Sousanis' work has been praised as a »novel medium of thought« (Pietrzak-Franger, Packard and Schwertfeger, 11; my translation), after all. The reason why all these essayistic forms of comics coherence have been thoroughly undertheorized in present scholarship can perhaps be found in the definitional project of comic scholarship itself. The ultimately arbitrary decision to define the comics form as images in narrative sequence can only be justified through pragmatic considerations: »Images and sequences […] are both the most repeated and the least contested features in comics definitions« (Gavaler, 9). An ongoing search for revised definitions of comics, in contrast, should remain an essential part of comics scholarship (see Packard 2016), precisely because their prototypical or innovative features will keep changing in front of our eyes, alongside their employed forms of coherence. Our theory should reflect that and, perhaps, pay more attention to emerging non-narrative, essayistic expressions. There is much work to be done to describe the various forms of interrelations, juxtapositions, and tensions between ›comicitious‹ pictures and verbal essays.

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Fig. 3: Sousanis 2015, 6–7.

Fig. 4: Sousanis 2015, 75.

Fig. 5: Schlogger 2021c.

Fig. 6: Schlogger 2021a.

1] What should perhaps be mentioned immediately is that we have known ›arguing‹ comics, of course, at least since McCloud's »metacomic« trilogy (see Cook). But McCloud makes use of an avatar »guiding through arguments as if he was not arguing himself (as the overall author/artist) but instead narrating [the articulation of] an argument« (Packard 2013, 26; my translation). We do not find such pictorial avatars in my following examples. In terms of the theory proposed later, McCloud's pictorially represented avatar, always located in spatiotemporal situations, generates base-narrativity across the work – and thus narrative coherence – while Barry's, Sousanis', and Schlogger's works do not.

2] To avoid misunderstandings, narrative coherence can usually also be found within non-fictional works of comics journalism, graphic memoirs, documentary comics, etc. (see Johnson; Worcester). The question of (non-)narrative coherence is independent from the assumed (non)fictionality of the represented domain under discussion.

3] Eco's example is Spinoza's *Ethics*.

4] In the fourth section I will consider cases where they do *not* do this.

5] If an extradiegetic narrating character is fictional (or in some other ways distinguished from the actual writer) the ›plane‹ they must exist on *could* be considered such a ›first-level domain‹, relegating all narrated facts to a lower level.

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Comics as Coherence Machines?

Case Studies on The Spectrum of Functions That Comics Perform in Museums[1]

Barbara M. Eggert (Stuttgart)

When we talk about comics in general and museum comics in particular, we usually refer to manifestations in the form of books, booklets, comic strips in magazines, or webcomics.[2] While the two-dimensional architecture of a digital comic is experienced by swiping vertically or horizontally, analog formats offer a three-dimensional space between the covers that has to be traversed by readers who are eager to turn the page to be able to follow the narration (compare Chute and Jagoda; Eckhoff-Heindl; Trinkwitz). Within this three-dimensional space, recurring motifs and elements form threads of visual coherence running through the narrative, a phenomenon that Thierry Groensteen refers to as »braiding« (Groensteen, 146). In this contribution, however, I will focus on visual coherence beyond the printed page, as I will discuss comics that transcend the boundaries of paper and screen and extend the art of braiding into the three-dimensional, architectural interior of exhibition spaces.[3] As an example of this special type of comics I chose the Haydn cycle, which was created in 2017 by visual artist Horst Stein in cooperation with curator Werner Hanak-Lettner for the permanent exhibition at the Haydn birthplace (Haydn-Geburtshaus) in Rohrau, Lower Austria.[4] The Haydn cycle will be used to illustrate some of the aesthetic and mediating functions that comics and elements of comics can perform in exhibitions. My main focus, however, will be on the coherence function of this specific graphic narration. In this paper, coherence is very generally defined as a continuity of sense created by both structural and narrative features of Horst Stein's work. The examples will show how the cycle establishes intra-medial connections concerning its own storyline while creating an inter-medial storyline for the exhibition narrative that unfolds across several rooms and integrates the exhibited objects.

But is it … a comic?

In the exhibition catalog, the cycle is described as a »graphic novel« (Hanak-Lettner, 27). This is irritating, since the (controversial) term ›graphic novel‹ is usually applied to more or less complex, self-contained graphic narratives that are published in the form of a book (see, among others, Chute, esp. 16–21; Cates; Williams, 6–10; Etter, 3). Neither the formal nor the narrative requirements are met by the Haydn cycle, which has not been published in any form (apart from its presentation within the context of the exhibition) and does not offer a self-contained narrative. However, on the eight sheets that form the cycle, Horst Stein unfolds a non-linear graphic narrative that integrates elements that are typical of the multimodal comics medium.

A reproduction of one sheet of the cycle visualizes the beginning of Joseph and Michael Haydn's musical education (fig. 1). It features panel-like images which are separated by gutters. The text elements on the sheet are either placed inside of speech bubbles, for example when Stein allows the Haydns to speak for themselves, or they are integrated unframed into the layout. One example of the latter can be found on the right-hand side of this sheet, where Empress

Fig. 1: Introducing Joseph and Michael Haydn.

Maria Theresia complains about the adolescent Joseph Haydn, who encouraged his fellow choirboys to climb the scaffolding of Schönbrunn Castle with him. This mix of speech bubbles and unframed passages of texts can be found on some of the other sheets as well. In addition, Stein makes use of thought bubbles to convey textual or visual imaginations of the members of the Haydn family (see fig. 4) and to compress different layers of time in his compositions.

To continue their reading of Stein's site-specific comics creation, the visitors of the exhibition cannot simply turn the pages, as they would do when reading a comic book, but they must physically overcome spatial gutters: They have to move through the building and go on a search for the continuation of the narrative, because the cycle is distributed throughout the house. As will be shown, there is neither a fixed sequence of rooms nor of the sheets, which means that the process of reading the cycle could basically start at any point. In spite of its non-linearity there certainly is a coherent intra-medial storyline that links all of the sheets with each other as well as an inter-medial storyline consisting of the pages of the comic and the exhibits of each room.

Creating a storyline

For the context of museal exhibitions, Charlotte Martinz-Turek defines the term ›storyline‹ as a content-oriented guideline that aims to make a statement (15–16). In analog exhibitions, and these are the ones that Martinz-Turek refers to in her text, the exhibits are usually to be understood as the heart of the storyline. These material objects are staged according to the exhibition design (e.g. lighting direction) and are often flanked by texts and other interpretational media. Martinz-Turek distinguishes between »Erzählungen, die bewusst konzipiert wurden« [transl. narratives that were deliberately conceived] and those »die jenseits jeglicher Intention scheinbar feststehende gesellschaftliche Werte tradieren« [transl. that, unintentionally, pass on seemingly fixed social values] (15). In the case of the exhibition at the Haydn's birthplace, one consciously conceived narrative is the family history that unfolded in this house, where the entire Haydn family lived together. Consequently, an essential task of Stein's was to visualize the members of the Haydn family for the visitors of the memorial site and to create a condensed, yet coherent family story within the exhibition space. Apart from their comic-internal coherence, which is mainly achieved through the thematic focus of the cycle and its recurring (narrating) characters, the sheets also create spatial coherence within the rooms of the memorial site as will be discussed later on.

Exhibiting (via) comics

In my typology of exhibiting comics, which I have expounded in other contexts (see, among others, Eggert 2020), I distinguish between exhibitions about comics[5] and – as in the case of

Rohrau – exhibitions via comics.[6] While in the former type comics are thematically the center of the exhibition – with a focus on comics' history, genres, creators, creation, perception, etc., in the latter type comics or comic elements are utilized for the purposes of mediation or as parts of the exhibition design. In most cases, this mediating function is detrimental to the medium's artistic aspirations, which warrant a study of comics as art objects in their own right. In Horst Stein's work mediation and artistic complexity join forces to create a category of its own. This is due to the artist's craftsmanship,[7] but also due to the presentation of the cycle within the context of the exhibition space: All sheets are integrated into the information panels on the exhibition walls and are shown behind glass (see fig. 3). This showcases them as exhibits and stages them as art. The sheets of the cycle are presented in the same way as the original archival objects. However, this presentation obscures the fact that high-quality copies are shown in the exhibition, while the originals are stored in St. Pölten for conservational reasons.[8]

Stein's cycle for the Haydn birthplace comprises a total of eight sheets, 62 x 46 cm in sepia technique (handmade paper with ink drawings), which record various aspects of the life (and afterlife) of the Haydn family. Three of the sheets are dedicated to the depiction of family life (see e.g. fig. 4 and fig. 6). One sheet links family life to the early musical careers of Joseph and Michael (fig. 1). The musical careers of both composers are the topic of two more sheets. The remaining two sheets are dedicated to Haydn research, with a focus on the birthplace. Although the drawings can be sorted chronologically and thematically, they do not necessarily have to be read in a linear fashion. In this article, I will focus on the sheets that depict family life, as these are the most complex with regard to visualizing and blending different layers of time: They do not only represent historical facts about the family members but, as will be shown, present fictionalized images of what could have been.

The creation of the cycle and its exhibition context

The specific occasion for the creation of the cycle was the reopening of the Haydn memorial in 2017.[9] As museal institutions, birthplaces, residences, and death houses of famous people occupy a special position in cultural memory (Bohnenkamp et al. 2015; Kahl and Kalvelage; Seibert, esp. 20–22), they received a strong boost from the cult of personality and genius in the 19th century. Curators used (and sometimes still use) the ›authentic-auratic‹ atmosphere of these places to promote art and perpetuate myths about artists centred around the – usually male – genius. These are made accessible to or even tangible for the visitors by offering videos or other forms of representation (Bohnenkamp 2015; Drecoll et al.). It is due to this spatio-temporal perceptual dispositive that other people, who made the artistic work of these cult figures possible in the first place, such as their families

and the staff, hardly ever appear within the storylines of these spaces or, at best, make a marginal appearance.[10] In Rohrau, a different approach was consciously chosen. As will be shown, the cycle by Horst Stein plays an important role in this context, as it foregrounds family life in general and gives a voice to the composer brothers' mother and to their eldest sister, Franziska, in particular. But even the name, »Haydn-Geburtshaus«, does not only refer to the famous composers, but to all Haydns who were born at the cottage: the permanent exhibition, according to curator Hanak-Lettner, »stellt die Kindheit und Jugend der Haydn-Kinder und die frühe Karriere der beiden angehenden Komponisten Joseph und Michael in den Mittelpunkt« [transl. focuses on the childhood and youth of the Haydn children and the early careers of the two budding composers Joseph and Michael] (10). Moreover, it should be added that the house itself takes on a central role as the unifying living space of the many-headed family. The building, which was described by Ludwig van Beethoven as a »schlichte Bauernhütte« [transl. a simple peasant's hut] (Nohl, 5), a small cottage with a thatched roof, had been built by the wheelwright Mathias Haydn himself in 1727 before his marriage to the daughter of the local judge, Maria Anna Koller, in 1728, who had worked as a cook at the nearby castle of Count Harrach. The following diagram (fig. 2) shows the current room layout and also records the different construction phases from the building's erection until the last architectural makeover in 1958/59.

The question marks in Peter Aichinger-Rosenberger's diagram make it clear that, for most of the rooms, it is uncertain how they were originally used. The room on the left-hand side of the entrance might have been an ante room or a kitchen (»Vorraum oder Küche«), the adjacent room might have functioned as a living room (»Wohnstube«), whereas the compartment to the far left could have served as a sleeping room (»Schlafzimmer«). The permanent exhibition, into which the comic cycle is integrated, deals very openly with this gap in knowledge by pointing out that the exhibition space and the exhibits chosen for it visualize possibilities concerning the original use of the rooms.

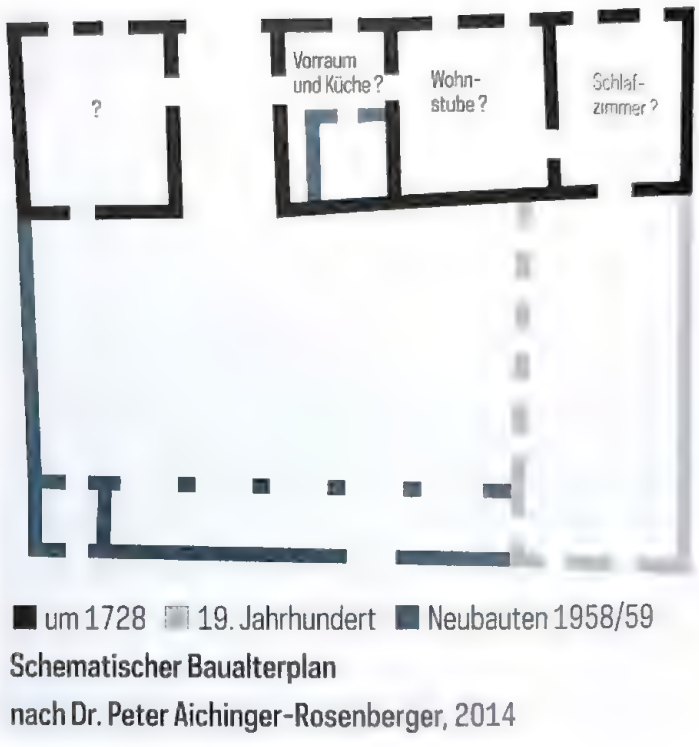

Fig. 2: Schematic plan of the phases of construction.

Framing family ties

In addition to the (early) career of the composer brothers, which took place far away from the family and Rohrau in (among other places) Vienna and London, the cycle created by Horst Stein mainly focuses on domestic family life. Three sheets introduce the Haydn family to the visitors of the memorial site. These three sheets and their spatial context within the exhibition will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

The room to the right of the entrance is one of the rooms whose original purpose could not be ascertained (see fig. 2). Today, it is dedicated to the childhood of the Haydn offspring and has been furnished with thematically and historically appropriate furniture from the folkloristic department of the State Collections of Lower Austria (fig. 3).

These include a cradle and a drum as stand-ins for typical eighteenth-century toys and furniture, as well as a Fraisenhäubchen, a cap for small children as a superstitious prophylactic remedy against cramps or epilepsy. The textile is adorned with religious motives, which creates the impression of a wearable proto-comic. Its style had served as inspiration for Stein's comic cycle.[11] Nothing has been preserved of the furnishings owned by the Haydn family, except for a built-in tiled stove, which will be discussed later. In this room, the visitors of the memorial site encounter

Fig. 3: The room to the right of the entrance.

a picture from Horst Stein's cycle, which gathers Mathias Haydn's children from his first marriage and mentions their siblings conceived with his second wife Maria Anna née Seeder (fig. 4).

The homodiegetic narrator of this drawing is Franziska (1730–1781), the eldest Haydn daughter, shown here by Horst Stein in the circle of her siblings. In total, she is depicted twice on the sheet – and at two different stages of her life. Stein lets the older Franziska break the fourth wall by addressing the visitors of the exhibition via a speech bubble: »Hier bin ich mit den Elfen« [transl. Here I am together with the eleven/the elves]. Thus, she explains the wreath of thought bubbles, which shows her together with eleven other children. Paradoxically, these bubbles are imagined by her younger self, who – a chicken in her arms – balances on a beam with five other youngsters, all of whom (except for Franziska) are wearing the uniform of the choirboys. Here, Stein references the sheet discussed at the beginning, which contains the anecdote of Joseph Haydn climbing the scaffolding at Schönbrunn with his fellow choirboys (fig. 1). At the same time, Stein alludes to the reduplication of bodies, which is commonly used to visualize movement (sequences) in the comics medium. Franziska is one of the twelve children that Maria Anna Haydn, née Koller, had given birth to in the house before she died in 1754 at the age of 46. Of the children from this first marriage, only Franziska and five of her siblings

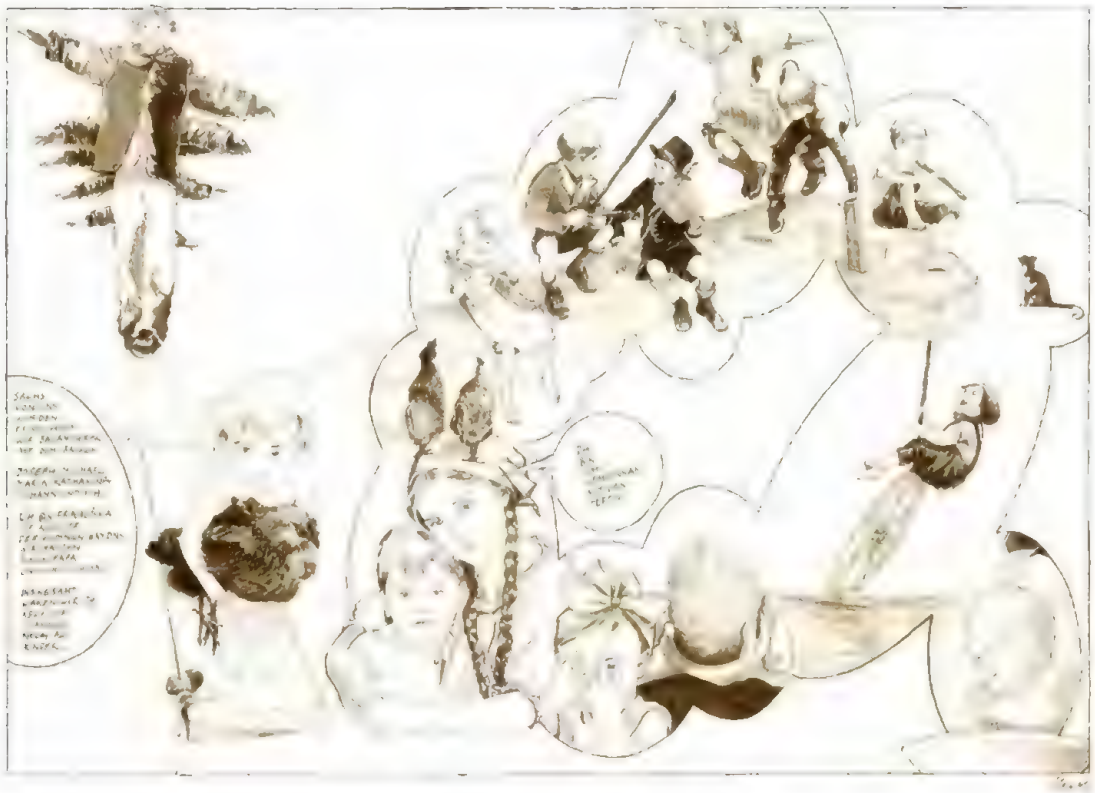

Fig. 4: The Haydn siblings.

reached adulthood.[12] Besides Franziska, these are the famous composer brothers Joseph (1732–1809) and Johann Michael (1737–1806), as well as Anna Maria (1739–1802), Anna Katharina (1741–n.d.),[13] and Johann Evangelist, who made a career as a singer (1730–1781). In keeping with their milieu and traditions, the girls received no formal education, as the curator specifically notes in the exhibition catalogue (Hanak-Lettner, 9). Nevertheless – or precisely because of this – Stein turns Franziska into the homodiegetic narrator of this sheet. However, the knowledge she shares with the visitors does not correspond to the age at which she is depicted, for when Bartholomew, her youngest brother, dies, Franziska is almost 31 years old.

Eternal remembrance – in accordance with a pictorial tradition

In general, Horst Stein's comic plays with different levels of time and reality and blurs the lines between them: A good example of this is the sheet discussed above, in which Stein depicts some of the brothers and sisters who died at an earlier age. In the wreath of bubbles,

Fig. 5: Martin Johann Schmidt. Family portrait. 1790.

these dead family members are presented on the same level of pictorial reality as the surviving ones. In reuniting the dead and the living, Stein draws on a Catholic pictorial tradition that aimed at securing the lasting memory of the deceased: One of many examples of this is provided by the Late Baroque painter Martin Johann Schmidt, called Kremser Schmidt, also from Lower Austria. The Schmidt family portrait (fig. 5), which unites the entire family including cats and a tiled stove, was intended for private family use.

In the upper right corner of the painting, Martin Johann Schmidt integrated a canvas with portraits of his deceased children into the family portrait. By adding these (painted) representations of the dead, he secured their memory as family members and showed that the deceased still remain part of the family. Stein did the same in his drawing of the Haydn siblings: The wreath of thought bubbles also reminds one vaguely of the beads of a rosary – another important item within Catholic rites of memory. But unlike Late Baroque painters such as Schmidt, Stein's drawing visualizes a different reality in which the children are not depicted at the age they had when they passed away. The artist does not document history here: he shows an alternative reality in which the children grew up to play (music) together, offering a visual representation of a fantasy that might have crossed the minds of the surviving siblings – especially Franziska's as she was the oldest and witnessed the births and deaths of all of her younger siblings.

Fig. 6: The Haydn parents.

Picturing the parents

On two other sheets, Stein introduces the Haydn parents. These are the only two sheets of the cycle that are displayed together in a vertical arrangement (fig. 6).
The portraits are located in the second room to the left of the entrance (see fig. 2). This room houses

the already mentioned tiled stove, an indication that this space may have originally served as a living room. In the eighteenth century, this part of the living quarters was usually heated – in contrast to the sleeping area that was not (Hanak-Lettner, 34–36). In keeping with the interpretation of the room, the tiled stove was supplemented with historically and functionally appropriate furniture from the State Collections of Lower Austria (table, corner bench, chest, and crockery shelf). In terms of content, the focus of this room is on »die Geschichte des Hauses und die Haydn-Eltern« [transl. the history of the house and the Haydn parents] (Hanak-Lettner, 36). Similar to the drawings of the Haydn siblings, the sheets depicting the Haydn parents have a multi-layered representative function.

Maria Anna Haydn, née Koller, the first wife of Mathias, worked as a palace cook for the Counts Harrach in the neighboring palace. Stein draws her a total number of three times – and in different roles: In the foreground, a bust portrait dominates the composition. She establishes eye-contact with the viewers, whom she addresses in direct speech, analogous to her daughter Franziska in the other example shown before. In the middle ground, she is depicted reclining with a baby on her chest. One of her feet is held by a putto, foreshadowing her early death. A medallion in the upper right corner shows her handling a pot in the castle kitchen – visualizing her musings about a painting of herself in which she would have liked to be portrayed as a cook. Thus, the medallion also serves as a stand-in for a contemporary portrait that never existed. The same applies to the sheet that is attached below and shows Maria Anna's husband, Mathias. The wheelwright is shown in the garb of his guild, working on a broken wheel, absorbed in his work. Through the broken spoke, two image-filled thought bubbles become visible, which show that Mathias' thoughts are with his family: On the far right we see the father of the family at the pointed harp, while a long-haired woman in the background reaches out of the thought bubble and into the wheel to stop it. According to Horst Stein, this is another image of the eldest daughter, Franziska,[14] but the woman who resembles the portrait of Maria Anna might also be seen as a representation of Fortuna, the goddess of fortune, who is often depicted with the wheel of life. Superimposed we find another thought bubble that contains three children. One of them utters a historical quotation from the biographical sketches of Joseph Haydn (Griesinger, 37), which is about the musical life in the Haydn house: »Manchmal spielte Vater auch auf den Speichen seiner Räder Harfe. Dann bettelten wir: Bitte spiel uns wirklich was vor!« [transl. Sometimes father played the harp on the spokes of his wheels. Then we pleaded: Please really play something for us!]

This depiction of the wheel and the cooking utensils is mirrored by two physical objects in the same room, which very likely was used as a living parlor, thus contributing to their justification or legitimization as exhibits at the Haydn birthplace. The wheel on display, for example, dates from the same period when the Haydn children were young, but is not from Hay-

dn's own workshop. That it might very well be is established by Horst Stein's artwork, who portrayed this exact wheel in his cycle. The simple-looking pan in the exhibition is equally contextualized and biographically valorized by the comic, which visualizes the object's original context, the former castle kitchen, and shows other utensils of the kitchen where Maria Anna used to work as a cook.

Conclusion

As has been shown, Horst Stein's comics cycle is closely linked to its spatial context and serves multiple purposes at the Haydn birthplace. For example, the comic has a representational and memorial function, since its sheets make the Haydn family visible again as former inhabitants of the rooms of the memorial place and undermine the cult of the musical genius by visualizing normal and vivacious family life. In line with this concept, Stein's cycle is not only concerned with the lives of the famous composer brothers Joseph and Michael. He gives all the members of the Haydn family a face, which also applies to the children who did not survive. In doing so, Stein defines family as a transhistorical composite of its living and deceased members. By making the Haydns themselves address the visitors of the memorial site, Stein dispenses with the representation of a superordinate (curatorial) narrative instance and ensures immediacy. In addressing historical personae as well as the contemporary visitors, the comic blends different layers of time, not only historical but also fictional ones, such as Franziska's vision of family life together with her deceased siblings.

The non-linear graphic narration of the cycle also links the individual rooms with each other and integrates the exhibits of the exhibition space into the biographical sphere of the comics cycle. The site-specific imagery helps to visualize and underscore the interpretation of the (possible) former functions of the rooms and hence gives meaning to the site and the objects on display from the State Collections of Lower Austria. The depicted objects, such as the wheel and the pan, are not just part of the storyworld created by Stein, but they also ascribe a quasi-authenticity to the exhibits in the storyline of the exhibition, legitimizing their status in spite of their origin, which is not directly linked to the historical Haydn household. Through their representation in the comic, their ›comification‹, the exhibits as well as the exhibition space become part of the continuum of the graphic narration.[15] Even though the permanent exhibition at the Haydn birthplace is not an exhibition about comics, it is also not just an exhibition via comics. By linking the rooms of the exhibition space with the help of a visual narration about the former inhabitants, the eight sheets of the cycle function as a coherence machine for the storyline of the exhibition, braiding the objects and their representations as well as (re)presentations of the historical personae closely together to form a coherent continuum. Each sheet of Stein's comic offers a multi-layered collage of temporal

and spatial aspects while at the same time functioning as the bond between the historical layers of the memorial site, the objects from the State Collections of Lower Austria, and the contemporary visitors.

In the same year that the cycle was created and exhibited, Andreas Platthaus was critical of the exhibition of comics: »Es gibt Kunstformen, die nicht für Ausstellungen gemacht sind; Comics gehören wie Literatur dazu. Will man sie partout ausstellen, muss man sich etwas anderes einfallen lassen als Aneinanderreihung« [transl. There are art forms that are not made for exhibitions; comics, like literature, belong to them. If you want to exhibit them nevertheless, you have to come up with something other than juxtaposition]. The present example is definitely »etwas anderes« [transl. something else] in Platthaus' sense. Only in situ can the complexity of Horst Stein's site-specific comic sheets and their interconnections with the exhibition spaces and the exhibits be comprehended. There, the fluid interplay, the mutual contextualization of spaces, objects, and comic sheets as components of a coherent storyline that is explicitly targeted at the visitors of the memorial site and re-constructed with their help becomes fully apparent. The drawn Haydns as intradiegetic narrators contribute significantly to the coherence of the storyline, engaging with the visitors as guides to historical and imagined pasts.

It is this mix of narrative levels, the interplay of comics cycle and displays, the expansion of visual narration into the exhibition space and its storyline that marks the setting of exhibition as a third type: exhibitions as comics.

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Fig. 1: Horst Stein (W/A) and Werner Hanak-Lettner (W). Von Rohrau über Hainburg ins größte Haus der Welt [transl. From Rohrau via Hainburg to the largest house in the world], 2017, sepia technique on handmade paper, 62 x 46 cm. St. Pölten: The State Collections of Lower Austria.

Fig. 2: Peter Aichinger-Rosenberger, Schematic plan of the phases of construction (in: Hanak-Lettner, 34).

Fig. 3: The room to the right of the entrance. Photo: Nafez Rerhuf.

Fig. 4: Horst Stein (W/A) and Werner Hanak-Lettner (W). Kleine Haydns [transl. Little Haydns. 2017, sepia technique on handmade paper, 62 x 46 cm. St. Pölten: The State Collections of Lower Austria.

Fig. 5: Martin Johann Schmidt. Family portrait. 1790, oil on zinc sheet, 72,4 × 86,4cm. Vienna: Upper Belvedere (on loan from private collection).

Fig. 6: Horst Stein (W/A) and Werner Hanak-Lettner (W). Von den Haydn-Eltern gab es kein Portrait [transl. There was no portrait of the Haydn parents], 2017, sepia technique on handmade paper, two sheets, 62 x 46 cm. St. Pölten: The State Collections of Lower Austria.

1] This article is cordially dedicated to my former colleagues at the University for Continuing

Education Krems, and the State Collections of Lower Austria, St. Pölten. They know why. Parts of this article appeared in German in another publication (Eggert 2023).

2] For museum comics that follow this definition see Yu-Kiener 2020. For webcomics see Hammel 2014.

3] The exhibition space and its specific rhythmization through showcases, frames, pedestals, etc. is a carrier medium of its own, whose genuine (narrative) rules I am exploring in my habilitation project (see also Eggert 2020).

4] Technically speaking, the Haydn birthplace is a memorial site that is used as a museum with exhibits such as original documents and historical objects of everyday life.

5] For a short overview concerning the history of exhibitions about comics in Germany see Grünewald (2020).

6] There is a third type, exhibitions as comics, and I will get back to this type briefly in the conclusion of this article.

7] Stein works without pencils, immediately starting with ink.

8] Stein took care of the reproductions himself. In the context of the workshop »Bildnarrationen im Raum. Zeichnerische Praktiken und Comics als Tools in Ausstellungen« [transl. Pictorial narratives in space. Practices of drawing and comics as tools in exhibitions] (Karikaturmuseum Krems, 19./20.09. 2022), which I had organized together with Eva Tropper (Museumsakademie Joanneum), Stein jokingly referred to these facsimiles of eye-fooling quality as »Austrian originals«.

9] The house was opened for the first time in 1959 (Hanak-Lettner, 17). It is thus the most recent Haydn memorial in Austria to be used as a museum. In 1982, the house was extensively renovated on the occasion of Joseph Haydn's 250th birthday (ibid., 23).

10] One reason for this is the adherence to the cliché of the ›lonely genius‹ as an important ›myth of the artist‹, which is also the title of the book by Kris and Kurz, first published in 1937.

11] Oral remark during the workshop »Bildnarrationen im Raum. Zeichnerische Praktiken und Comics als Tools in Ausstellungen« (20.9.2022).

12] Of the five children born to Mathias Haydn's second wife, Maria Anna Seeder, none reached their first birthday. This part of the second Haydn family is not in the picture but mentioned by Franziska: »Insgesamt waren wir 17. Aber elf starben noch als Kinder.« [transl. There were 17 of us in total. But eleven died during childhood.]

13] There are no documents about Anna Katharina Näher née Haydn after 1768.

14] Oral remark during the workshop »Bildnarrationen im Raum. Zeichnerische Praktiken und Comics als Tools in Ausstellungen« (20.9.2022).

15] This is also true for the other sheets that have not been discussed in this context, some of which also reference curatorial decisions.

CLOSURE
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Invincible

Multiscale Coherence in Comics [1]

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Abstract

In comics, combinations of text bubbles, captions, frame sizes and page turns, married to individual images or sequences, invite the reader to develop expectations of what is to come, which – in turn – allows the creator to generate surprising violations of those expectations. Such expectations provide moments of coherence in which the reader's predictions match what happens in the story, while the violations reflect moments of incoherence or disruption (i.e., surprise). The present paper demonstrates how these intervals of coherence capitalize upon the expectation-surprise dynamics that are at work in every moment of daily life and can sometimes lead one to investigate behaviors, reflecting a desire to learn more. In the end, we propose that comic books can be seen as a technology that capitalizes on the neuro-cognitive, expectation-surprise dynamics of daily life, allowing readers to organically develop immersive and complex narrative worlds. We examine this proposal with examples from the highly successful comic series *Invincible* which, itself, can be seen as a narrative violation of contemporary expectations regarding violence and morality that has been brought about via the advent of antihero narratives in graphic novels such as *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*.

Introduction

Have you ever tripped on the sidewalk because a part of it was higher that you expected, or almost fallen down the stairs because you thought you had reached the last one, but had not? Have you ever waited for your turn to speak during a conversation and become frustrated because someone jumped in before you, or heard a friend say something that took you completely by surprise and left you feeling differently about them?

All of these situations are examples of the dynamic interaction between expectation and surprise that play out in our daily lives. Research indicates that from walking (i.e., action) to voice pitch (i.e., perception) to thoughts about friends (i.e., cognition), expectation-surprise dynamics occur because our experiences of ourselves and the world are continually, anticipatorily primed by our memories (Jordan 2021). For example, the perceived vanishing point of a moving stimulus is displaced forward, in the direction of stimulus motion, if one has memories of having controlled the stimulus movements in the past (Jordan and Hunsinger 2008). The distance to the end of a hallway is perceived as being further if one has memories of wearing a backpack while walking down that hallway (Vinson, Jordan and Hund 2017). Members of a group discussion unconsciously experience a gradual decrease in the pitch of a speaker's voice as a ›cue‹ the speaker is intending to stop speaking (Meyer, Streeck and Jordan 2017). And people who have memories of interacting with each other are able to unconsciously experience the words that will come next during a conversation (Streeck and Jordan 2009a, 2009b).

Given that these expectation-surprise events occur in action, perception, and cognition, it seems to be the case that the phenomenon of surprise is actually rather ubiquitous in our experiences. In fact, the theory of multi-scale effect control (MSEC; Jordan 2003, 2013; Kumar and Srinivasan 2017) proposes that the brain is organized in such a way that cortical areas involved in acting, perceiving, and thinking continually, unconsciously activate memories of previous actions, perceptions, and cognitions. These memories recursively feed back into the cortical areas that activated them in a time-cycle that takes only 10 milliseconds. As a result, cortical areas involved in action, perception, and cognition are continually, almost instantly primed by memories. These emergent memories create an anticipatory edge to our experiences. Moments of experience in which such expectations are consistent with what actually happens might be described as being *coherent*, in the sense that the phenomenological moment constitutes a unified whole, while moments in which our unconscious expectations are violated might be described as being *incoherent* because the phenomenological moment is full of disruption (i.e., expectation violation), what we traditionally define as surprise.

Given this experience-expectation approach to describing coherence, the purpose of the present paper is to do the following: (1) examine how the creation and disruption of coherence underlies our experiences of comic books, (2) examine how authors and illustrators capitalize on the memory-fueled nature of our experiences to purposely create expectation-surprise patterns (i.e., coherence and disruption) in features that range in scale from text bubbles, captions, and frame sizes, to page turns, character arcs, and story stages, all in the name of creating multiple scales of expectation in the reader that can later be strategically violated, and (3) discuss the pedagogical implications of consuming narratives following the coherence-disruption, expectation-surprise dynamics of comics.

Coherence and Systems of Expectation

According to MSEC (Jordan 2003, 2013, 2014; Kumar and Srinivasan 2017), memory-driven anticipations are ubiquitous in cortical activity because they allow us to partition changes in brain activity that occur as we move, perceive, and think into changes that correspond to our anticipations and plans versus changes that run counter to our expectations (Golfinopoulos, Tourville and Guenther 2010; Ito 2008). This ubiquitous, anticipation-based parsing allows me to distinguish an ›I‹ from the ›not-I‹. For example, most people find it rather difficult to tickle their own bodies (Blakemore, Wolpert and Frith 1998) because memory-driven anticipation-parsing dampens brain activity involved in the experience of touch. Such anticipatory tuning serves as a threshold, a border, that frames any following stimulation as being due to ›me‹ or ›not me.‹ In a sense, one might claim our memory-driven, anticipatory parsing is a form of »foundational othering« that underlies the self/not-self structure of our moment-to-moment phenomenology (Jordan, in press). When these memory-emergent otherings become associated with emotions such as joy and fear, we tend to conceptualize them as *surprise*. Regardless of the presence of emotions, however, these memory-driven, anticipatory parsings are fundamental to the self/not-self nature of our phenomenology, of being someone (Jordan 2018). For example, persons diagnosed with schizophrenia express abnormalities in the neural interaction between anticipation and memory and are therefore more capable of tickling themselves. That is, they plan to tickle their forearm, but their memory-fueled anticipations do not partition the resulting sensations as being initiated by themselves. As a result, it *feels* as if the stimulation is coming from something or someone else. Many researchers now believe these impaired memories of intentional behavior account for the hallucinations and delusions associated with schizophrenia (Andreasen, Paradiso and O'Leary 1998; Blakemore, Wolpert and Frith 1998; Wiser and Andreasen 1998).

An important take away from these data regarding schizophrenia is the idea that our memory-fueled, unconscious anticipations actually create the possibility of coherent experience. That is, if the brain is unable to continually prime cortical activity with memories that serve to parse brain activity into self and other, there will be no ›I‹, no system, that is having experiences. This notion implies that our memory-fueled, unconscious expectations create a phenomenological background against which events can be foregrounded as ›stimuli‹. And what is perhaps most remarkable about these anticipation parsings is that we do not feel ourselves making them. Rather, they occur so quickly (i.e., within 10 msec of cortical stimulation), that what we experience is either a continuous, uninterrupted flow of coherent experience, or, if our expectations are violated, surprise.

This persistent, coherence-providing, anticipatory edge to our phenomenology has been found to be at work in our experiences of comics. For example, Cohn and Foulsham (2022) report that presenting someone an image of a face paired with either an image of an object traditionally paired with faces (e.g., a lightbulb) or an object not traditionally paired with faces

(e.g., clover-leaves) leads to brain activity heavily influenced by memory. Specifically, traditional face-lightbulb pairings lead to an enhanced N250, a neural potential associated with expertise, meaning face-lightbulb pairings were consistent with memory (i.e., expected) and led to a larger N250, even if the emotion on the face was inconsistent with the lightbulb (i.e., a frowning versus a smiling face). In addition, unexpected pairings (e.g., faces with clover-leaves) were associated with larger N400s, a brain potential correlated with the need to determine the meaning of a stimulus, what Cohn and Foulsham refer to as ›semantic processing costs‹. In both cases, N250 and N400 reveal just how thoroughly our moment-to-moment experiences are imbued with memories of how we have experienced similar events in the past. And just like walking, talking, and thinking, the memories tapped into during Cohn and Foulsham's study were developed over a lifetime of reading comics and seeing thought bubbles paired with images of faces.

Scales of Expectation in Comics

As an example of expectations at work in comics, in this excerpt from Issue 44 (2007) of the 144-issue run of the hit series *Invincible* (co-created by Robert Kirkman and Cory Walker, with Ryan Ottley as Illustrator), the lead character, Mark Grayson (titular hero, Invincible), has just fended off a massive sea creature from attacking a cruise ship at sea. His efforts were aided, or more accurately, amplified by the assistance of Anissa, a member of the extraterrestrial species known as Viltrumites. Though they share a terrestrial ancestry, there is a lingering current of tension between them. The Viltrumites are a conquering race, and they have set Earth, Mark's home planet, for conquest. At the top third of the page, we see two congruent panels each containing a single character, but even at this early stage,

Fig. 1: Mark and Anissa. From Invincible # 44, p. 19.

already a disruption of expectations is taking shape. Specifically, although Mark is the star and protagonist of the series, he is offset and diminished due to his placement in the panel. By means of his posture (there's a suggested lean to his stance), and the exhaustion portrayed in his word balloon and speech, he's made to appear harried, acknowledging that his counterpart did most of the work. In contrast, Anissa stands relatively unphased by the ordeal, her posture upright, without additional labor in her speaking. The smatterings of blood on her uniform also hint at a more destructive output. Thus, the very top third of this page disrupts two expectations. The first has to do with presenting Mark, the assumed hero of the story, as being weaker than the antagonist, and the second is Anissa's extreme level of seemingly effortless violence, despite her outward presentation as female. The expectation regarding Mark has been built up over the course of the story to this point, while the expectation regarding Anissa derives from historical comic tropes that tend to depict women in roles that are inconsistent with her performance in *Invincible*. Thus, while one expectation derives from the readers' memories of reading *Invincible*, the other derives from memories that have developed over many years, both in terms of creating and consuming comics. In short, these two frames take advantage of and violate two different time scales of memory-primed expectation. The truly important point to recognize is that both are at work at the same time during the reading, providing coherence to the moment-to-moment experiences of the text.

In the middle panel of the page, our expectations change as the perspective switches to a single, page-width panel containing a bird's eye view of the scene, which traditionally works as an establishing shot, typically situated as the first panel of a scene. This unexpected angle (i.e., a disruption of an expectation derived from memories of reading comics) re-contextualizes the scene, accentuating our experience of the two characters being in a common, geographical space, while the aerial positioning makes the reader feel intrusive, as if they were venturing into a conversation, uninvited. This tension is enhanced by the positioning of Mark and Anissa. Their stances reflect an antagonistic standoff, which is an immediate role reversal from the notes of camaraderie they had just expressed. The text in this frame, yet again, generates a surprisingly tense contrast to this antagonistic tension, as Anissa attempts to establish common ground with Mark by appealing to their shared roles as warriors charged with protecting the citizens of Earth, albeit, for different reasons.

The experience of a slower, cognitive pace created by this middle frame is then clearly violated in the bottom third of the page as the number of panels now equals four, priming an expectation of faster-paced events. Mark's non-verbal response in the first panel clearly undermines any expectation of agreement with the Viltrumite's appeal to common roles, and the psychological intensity of the moment is increased frame by frame with clockwork precision as the characters' faces loom closer and closer to the reader. Then, with the turn of the page, we see the following:

Fig. 2: Anissa surprises Mark. From Invincible #44, p. 20.

Clearly, Mark has been surprised. While both he and the reader may have experienced the frames of the previous page as a potential negotiation, Anissa never had any such expectation. The surprise we experience with this full-page spread is in response to the creation and violation of expectations created on the previous page, where the creators put the reader through changing expectations of parity (top third of the page), antagonistic, potential

cooperation (middle third of the page), and a gradual, rapid increase in opposition (bottom third of the page). Each of these expectations provided coherence to the reader's experiences of the text until, of course, they were violated. In addition, as movement from the top-third to the middle-third disrupts our experience of parity (i.e., it slightly surprises us) and transforms it into potential cooperation, the latter experience is constrained and contextualized by the previous experience. That is, the experiences associated with consecutive intervals of coherence are not independent of each other. Rather, earlier intervals of coherence give shape and meaning to latter experiences in a contextually-emergent fashion. Thus, the ›BANG‹ we experience with the page turn gains much of its shape and meaning from the shifts in coherence (i.e., violations of expectation) that preceded it, much in the same way that the experience of a note in a song is given shape and meaning by the notes, chords, and key changes that preceded it.

Scales of Surprise: The Daily Life of a Contemporary Superhero

Comic books and, more specifically, superheroes have served as archetypal examples of moral standing in the United States since their inception, operating as modern incarnations of ancient myths—figures and stories illustrating cultural expectations (i.e., norms) that instruct and govern the populace. Through this medium, authors and illustrators can create characters that embody virtues and vices in various combinations along a spectrum from Good/Right to Bad/Wrong, often allowing characters to coherently fulfill the reader's expectations of heroism and villainy at both ends of the spectrum.

As characters of a particular ›age‹ of comics behave in a similar fashion across issues in terms of immediate actions, themes, and story arcs, readers unintentionally come to experience these patterns as unconscious expectations. These unconscious expectations provide coherence for readers, yet also give rise to a context from which issues of heroism and character values can be challenged. For example, in the 1980s, limited series such as *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* purposefully manipulated readers' expectations of heroism while simultaneously reflecting societal challenges to traditional notions of right and wrong, good and evil. These challenges and ambiguities were embodied in what came to be known as anti-heroes: characters whose misdeeds run counter to their proclaimed intentions. For such characters, a good thing can be considered wrong, and a bad thing can be considered right, based on the beholder's personal belief structure.

While discussions regarding anti-heroes abound, the point to be made in the current context is that the popularity of anti-heroes emerged contextually out of the creators' and readers' unconscious expectations regarding traditional heroes. That is, Frank Miller and Allan Moore did not simply write expository essays in which they spelled out their deep

concerns regarding traditional notions of super-powered super-heroes. Rather, they created narrative structures that activated the reader's unconscious expectations the same way such expectations are activated in daily life, more specifically, via the actions, perceptions, and cognitions of people. Activating these unconscious expectations afforded readers intervals of coherent experience that could then be disrupted in the same way most expectations are disrupted in daily life.

So, what kind of ›people‹ do we meet in contemporary superhero comics? Despite this historical rise of the anti-hero, research clearly indicates that traditional notions of heroism (e.g., bravery, moral integrity, conviction, honesty, altruism, selflessness, and determination) still maintain a trope-like longevity (Kinsella, Ritchie and Igou 2015). As a matter of fact, Brombert (1999) famously stated, »The antihero can only exist if the heroic model remains present in absentia, by preterition« (66). Favaro (2020) contends, however, that the notion of heroism has changed, in that contemporary heroes, unlike their Silver-age counterparts such as Superman, Iron Man, and Thor, actually kill. Favaro proposes that we are living in a Post-heroic Age in which seemingly endless cultural conflicts, massacres, genocides, and pending ecological disasters render the notion of purely good superheroes implausible. In short, in a world where values are uncertain and relative, the advent of superheroes who kill reflects an outright rejection of absolute notions of good and evil, and right and wrong, as well as an understanding that our notions of morality always emerge from a shared cultural context. ›Good‹ and ›Evil‹ then become increasingly defined pragmatically, in terms of ›Self‹ and ›Other‹.

It is in the cultural milieu of this supposed ›Post-Heroic Age‹ that the superhero series *Invincible* emerged. Creators Robert Kirkman (writer), Ryan Ottley, and Corey Walker (artists) fully embrace the notion that contemporary heroes kill – a lot. As a matter of fact, it seems as if they created these super-violent superheroes as a way of satisfying contemporary readers' expectations, and then subvert those same expectations in very human domains such as personal loss, education, and conflict resolution.

In Issue 43 of *Invincible* (2007), there is a three-page spread in which three different characters have interactions that simultaneously establish and violate multiple levels of memory-fueled expectations. As regards heroism, *Invincible* is predicated on common character archetypes. The most obvious is the Superman trait – single, overtly powerful individuals, with physical abilities centered on strength, speed, durability, and flight. *Invincible* contains multiple characters that follow this archetypal format with varying degrees of potency, from the series namesake, Invincible, to his Viltrumite father, Omni-Man. To a lesser extent, one could also include the leader of the Guardians of the Globe (and former alias of President Abraham Lincoln), The Immortal.

In this scene in Issue 43 (2007), Immortal has recently lost his wife, who was also his Guardians of the Globe teammate, Dupli-Kate. According to traditional superhero tropes,

when supermen find and lose their love interests, the result is usually an emotional retreat for the hero – turning their emotional vulnerability into a viable, unavoidable weakness. Within *Invincible*, however, The Immortal's longevity and expanded lifetime have allowed him to oddly, if not coldly, adjust to the reality of losing loved ones. Thus, he openly states that, while his love for Dupli-Kate should not be diminished, he has dealt with the loss of a spouse before and prefers to distract himself with duty, as opposed to running from it. When compared to seminal stories like *Kingdom Come* and *Injustice*, that find Superman rudderless and off-kilter due to the death of longtime love interest, Lois Lane, this physically weaker Superman-archetype expresses far greater emotional fortitude. For not only is he willing to overlook his own heartache in favor of his duty to the world, he uses it as an opportunity to assuage his grief. Where traditional presentations of Superman find him hanging up his cape (for a time) or embarking on a characteristically altered sense of justice, Immortal stands resolute in his capacity as a hero.

Fig. 3: Immortal discusses loss. From Invincible #43, p. 5.

On the very next page, we experience another violation of both cultural and superhero tropes. In U.S. culture, many parents feel their function is to raise children with an attitude

and air for success as independent, self-sustaining adults. In modern culture, one of the tenets of that charge is the recognition and near mandate to pursue higher education. Achievement of collegiate studies has routinely been espoused as a building block for personal accomplishment, financial stability, and opportunity creation in the job market. But in a world with superheroes, particularly if your child is one, the relevance of such traditional pursuits is arguable. In Figure 4, Mark showcases a flippancy towards his academic studies. It would be easy to admonish his tone as youthful naivety or as an excuse for a slacker's lack of dedication, but his mother, Debbie Grayson, assesses his experiential lifestyle with a sense of legitimacy. As the wife of a superhero, she fully understands how irregular Mark's life path is now that he can count himself amongst the empowered. The value of education has its limits when your merits are rooted in the realm of physical acts of heroism and strength. While not completely dismissive of the value of a college degree, Debbie gives appropriate credence to the idea that Mark should decide for himself about his future and where a college education, as a resource, fits within his system of values. This turn is a robust violation of cultural notions of parent/young-adult relationships and speaks to the possibility of achieving self-actualization at such a young age.

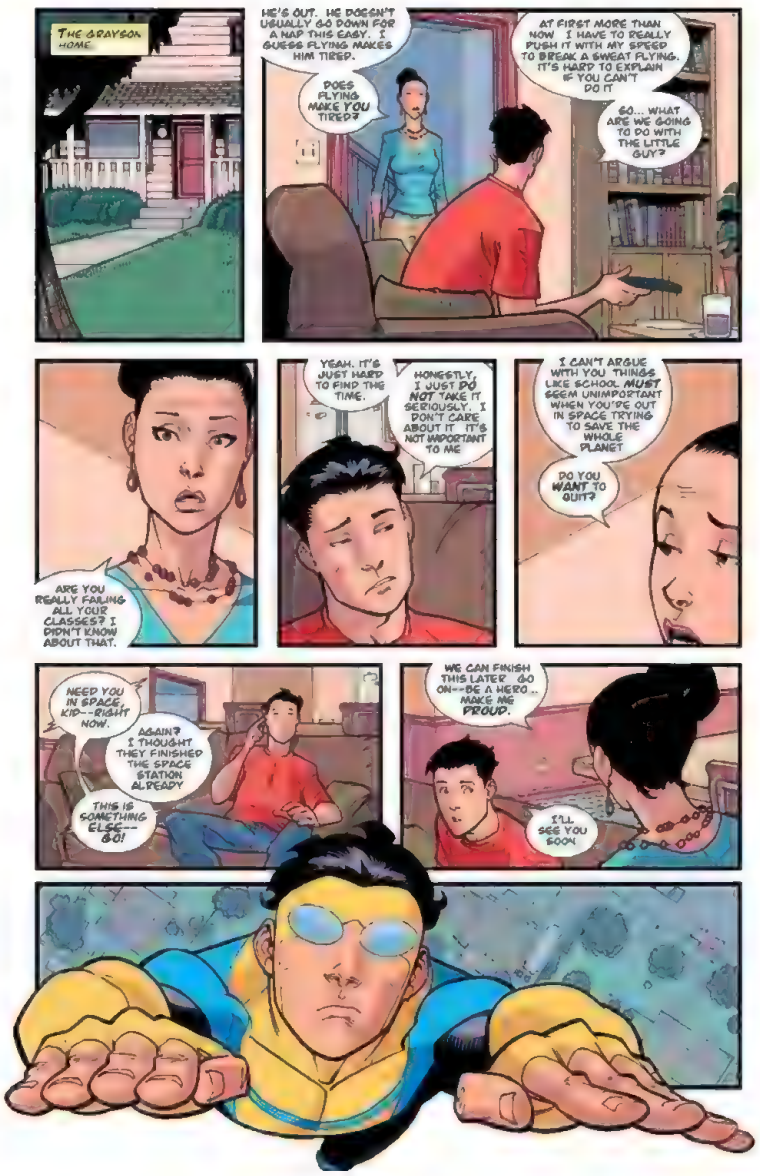

Fig. 4: Mark discusses college. From Invincible #43, p. 6.

Clearly, the preceding two examples present violations of traditional super-hero tropes. The reader's expectations about heroes and quitting in the face of loss are violated in Immortal's story, and also subverted in Mark's, as both he and his mother agree he should

perhaps quit school, and his mother actually affirms the need for him to be a super-hero. The awareness both characters have of making non-traditional decisions is amplified by the presentation of both characters breaking frame in the bottom panel of these pages, as if to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the two are engaged in much the same act and are feeling very much under pressure.

Then, at the top of the very next page (see fig. 5), we see Allen the Alien, breaking frame in a panel roughly twice the size of Immortal's and Invincible's frame breaks. The expectation of psychological pressure and urgency induced by Immortal's and Invincible's stern faces in those bottom panels, is delightfully violated by Allen's calm, gentle flight through space. The contrast between Allen's page and those of Immortal and Invincible contextualizes and shapes the meaning of Allen's frame, as if to say, »Look at my frame break! I'm so light and void of pressure, my frame break is actually at the top of my page instead of the bottom!"«

Fig. 5: Allen the Alien arrives. From Invincible #43, p. 7.

These multiple expectation-surprise sequences then, in turn, contextualize and shape the reader's experience of Immortal's and Invincible's next interactions. In the bottom two panels of Allen's page, we see Immortal follow the traditional super-hero trope of attacking an invader, in this case, Allen. Invincible, who was also headed toward Allen, sees the fight, and intervenes. Allen and Immortal stop fighting, and Allen reveals he has come to Earth to speak with Invincible about his

father. Over the following seven pages, Allen and Invincible discuss the issue in Invincible's dorm room. This long, drawn-out, sophisticated discussion starkly contrasts with Immortal's impulsive, trope-driven attack on Allen.

Cleary, the writers and illustrators have created this nesting of small-scale and large-scale expectation-surprise moments to hopefully lead the reader to *feel* that Mark is not a typical super-hero, and that *Invincible* is not a typical comic book. To be sure, Mark is violent, which is consistent with contemporary readers' unconscious expectations of comics brought on by decades of antihero narratives. But in *Invincible*, the violence is baked-in-the-cake, as it were, in that no one in the *Invincible* universe experiences superhero violence as a mark against heroism. It is as if the creators were saying, »What the hell else would you expect in a universe in which some beings are so much more powerful than most?« Thus, the anti-hero trope of judging heroes and society as corrupt, decaying, and worthy of contempt because they are full of violence is activated, providing coherence for the reader, and then violated as the narrative turns to examinations, not of the morality of violence, but of what life would be like if you were Immortal and had grown used to loss, or were a teenage superhero whose skills did not seem consistent with attending college.

Coherence in Comics and Moments of Pedagogy

While surprise can be an enjoyable experience, and *Invincible* clearly indulges in generating surprise, research clearly indicates that surprise can also inspire knowledge-seeking behavior. Vogl et al. (2019) refer to surprise, as well as curiosity and confusion, as *epistemic emotions*; that is, emotions associated with knowledge acquisition. In contrast, *achievement emotions*, such as pride and shame, are associated with knowledge expression, with pride following success and shame resulting from failure. According to these authors, surprise tends to be the first emotion that follows a violation of expectations, what these authors refer to as »schema-incongruous information« (2019, 2). Curiosity and confusion might then be triggered by surprise, potentially resulting in additional knowledge-seeking behavior, or stated in terms of the present paper, ›expectation realignment‹. In a series of experiments, these researchers discovered that achievement emotions, such as pride and shame, were most strongly associated with the correctness of an answer (i.e., the non-violation of expectation), with pride being strongest when following correct answers, and shame at its greatest following incorrect answers. However, surprise, curiosity, and confusion were most strongly associated with incorrect answers of which the participants were extremely confident. In other words, epistemic emotions were most robustly activated by strong violations of expectation (i.e., confidently answering a question and being wrong). Furthermore, in contrast to achievement emotions, epistemic emotions had a strong influence on knowledge-seeking behaviors.

Collectively, these findings indicate that intense violations of expectation generate epistemic emotions (i.e., surprise, curiosity, and confusion) that, in turn, motivate a return to content in the name of understanding. In short, surprise motivates investigation.

There is one scene in particular in *Invincible* that serves as an excellent example of how effectively the multi-scale, expectation-surprise dynamics of comics can have pedagogical utility. In Issue 44 of *Invincible* (2007), Mark and Eve (aka Atom-Eve) express their past and present feelings for each other. In male-led, heteronormative, superhero titles, the narrative of a love interest can be executed in a paint-by-numbers, dance-like routine. First, the hero, in their everyday guise, meets their would-be counterpart and is either unable to raise an eyebrow or is outright rebuffed. This interaction may build towards a meaningful, platonic friendship, with the hero consistently swallowing their unrequited affections. The shift in relationship comes, when, in their hero-state, they engage and possibly save that potential partner. Their ›new‹ identity, having been successfully othered from their daily form, is recognized as their better self, despite literally being the same person, garnering, but not exactly earning, the romantic gaze of that love interest. For a time, the relationship exists as a love triangle, with the duality of the

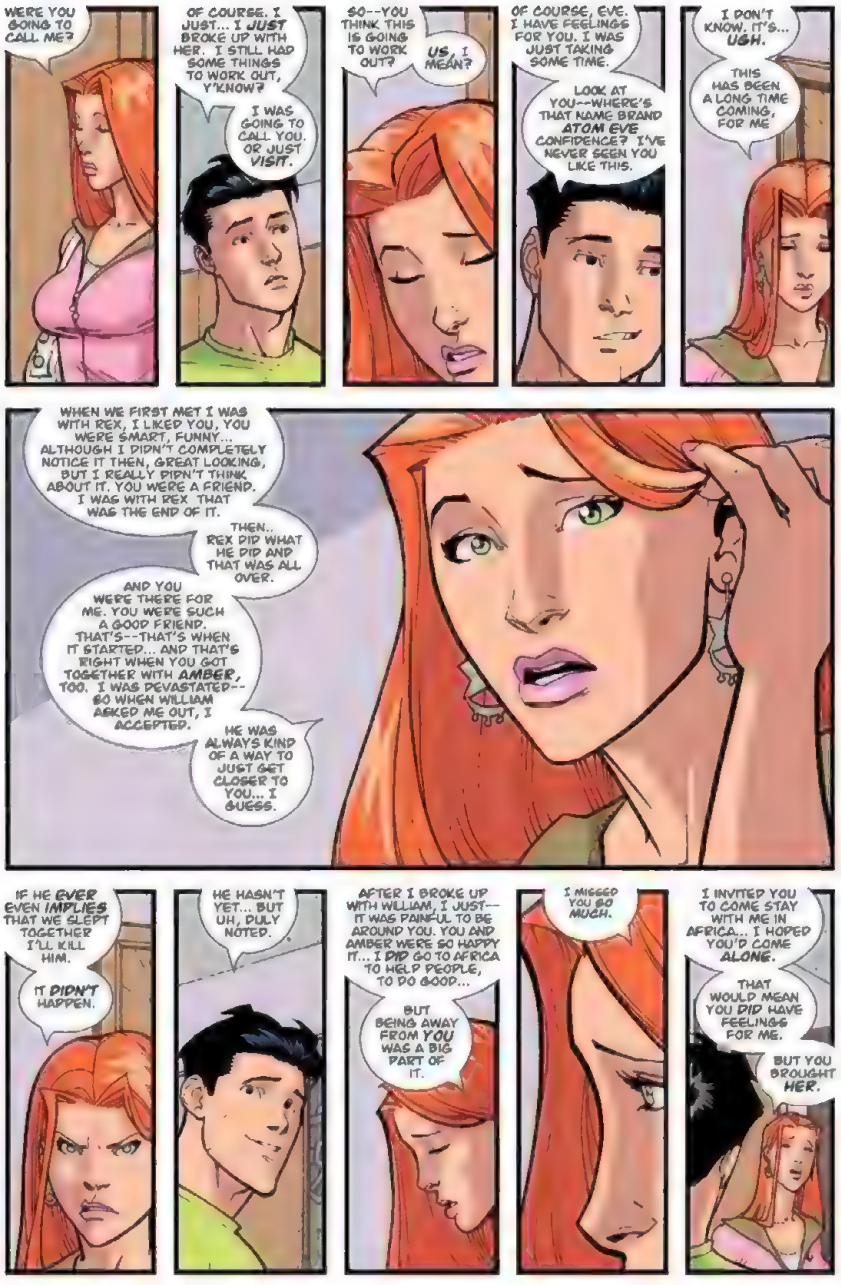

Fig. 6: Eve reveals emotional truth. From Invincible #44, p. 2.

hero's identities, played like a tennis ball, being battered back and forth to build the stakes and tension, until the narrative culminates in the inevitable discovery that they are one and the same.

The relationship between Mark and Samantha Eve Wilkins (the molecules-manipulating Atom Eve) dodges the love-triangle trope from the onset, beginning with Eve serving as the established hero between the two, effectively saving Mark during one of his first outings as Invincible. Despite being schoolmates, a statistical coincidence of immense proportions, and Atom Eve not wearing a mask to conceal her identity, the two did not know each other prior to their heroic dealings. As a result, the duality of their heroic identities serves as the basis for establishing a friendship. After a few failed relationships with others, some empowered, some not, they decide to give dating each other a chance. It is at this point that the most important violation of superhero love-tropes is featured. Unabated by secrets and posturing, the two have a genuine and open conversation about their interest in each other, examining how it developed and the subtle ways Eve specifically tried to pursue Mark. There is a fantastic sense of maturity and communication, bereft of the romantic game that so often undermines a relationship before it even begins.

Fig. 7: Mark reveals emotional truth. From Invincible #44, p. 3.

This exceptionally sophisticated emotional exchange is told over two pages (see figures 6 and 7), each laid out in thirds, with the middle-third being one, single panel. This layout

immediately generates an expectation of an information exchange in the top and bottom thirds, with a contrasting emotional reveal in the middle. While the conversation in the top and bottom panels is brief and matter-of-factual, the larger middle frame shows Eve clearly pulling her hair back from her face, literally rendering herself maximally vulnerable, while simultaneously revealing the emotional cascades she experienced over time as she came to like Mark. This page is Eve's moment of emotional truth, both to herself and to Mark, and the emotional depth of that truth is amplified by the degree to which readers do not expect to experience this kind of honest vulnerability regarding teenage love in a superhero comic.

On the very next page (fig. 7), we see Mark's ›truth‹ revealed. To be sure, the top third of his page is a single panel versus five separate panels, but the one panel contains both characters, centering the two of them in ›truth coherence‹ generated by Eve's page. In other words, the frame asks and answers the question, »Is Mark going to reciprocate Eve's honesty?" Then, just as in Eve's page, the middle third contains a full-face image of Mark, exuding the same level of vulnerability and truth Eve expressed in hers. And just as in Eve's case, the text in this middle frame expresses the cascades of emotions Mark went through as he gradually found himself attracted to Eve.

One could claim that the layout of these pages, while nonetheless making use of expectation-surprise dynamics, is really only there for emotional amplification. We propose, however, that the purpose of these frames is emotional education. The calm, vulnerable voice in which Eve and Mark express their emotions, their doubts, and their desires does not depict a type of adolescent relationship management we often see. In a sense, this entire sequence is an expectation violation of our culture's approach to depicting young-adult love and how one deals with it. By generating multiple, nested, expectation-surprise moments in the midst of Mark and Eve's truth exchange, the writers and illustrators continually surprise the reader, motivating curiosity, possibly confusion, and hopefully, knowledge exploration. That is, surprise and curiosity keep the reader reading, and in doing so, potentially expose them to a sophisticated, adult form of relationship management.

To be clear, we are not claiming these pages teach people how to manage relationships. What we are claiming, however, is that by *showing* the reader this style of relationship management via the use of the expectation-surprise dynamics endemic to the comic book format, the writers and illustrators are *showing*, not *telling*, the reader how to better manage relationships. To be sure, similar types of exchanges could be presented in prose fiction, in a song, or in a painting. Comics are not the only way to get such ideas across to others. If one is utilizing comics to do so, however, we believe *Invincible* represents a masterful example of how this can be achieved. Just imagine how many adolescents never *see* such sophisticated, adult-level conversations in their daily lives. To be sure, people will *tell* them how to manage relationships. But the neuropsychological data are clear; part of what it means to *see* another person behave, is to be put into the neurological planning state for doing the very same beha-

vior ourselves (Jordan 2003; Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Fogassi and Gallese 2002). In other words, action observation *is* action planning, and the reason we do not simply imitate everything we see other people do is because, over the course of our young lives, we develop neural inhibition circuits that allow us to prevent ourselves from doing what others do (Kinsbourne and Jordan 2009).

The point here is that seeing is planning. Thus, simply observing conversations such as Mark and Eve's primes us to engage in similar conversations ourselves. In addition, by skillfully manipulating the reader's emotional expectations the creators generate surprise, curiosity, and confusion in ways that keep the reader engaged in the sophisticated, often-rarely-seen-in-daily-life interactions contained all throughout *Invincible*. As any parent, friend, counselor, or educator will tell you, keeping learners engaged in knowledge exploration is more than half the battle.

Conclusions

In the present paper, we examined how comic creators manipulate the expectation-surprise dynamics inherent to everyday life and experience. We focused on *Invincible* because it serves as a masterful example of the different scales of memory and coherence that are created and manipulated with every frame, page, and issue. We also examined how these expectation-surprise dynamics can give rise to epistemic emotions that potentially induce information-seeking behaviors in the reader. This idea that surprise encourages epistemic search is consistent with assertions Dr. Jane McGonigal made in her 2011 book, *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. In that book she empirically supports the claims that video games are so popular because they give rise to a form of *discovery learning* in which participants express agency by actively investigating an environment. Such on-going flows of agency give rise to on-going coherence to the phenomenology of the learner/player. Game creators, just like comics creators, introduce environments that afford the emergence of such coherent flows of experience in order to eventually violate them in ways that lead to epistemic emotions such as surprise, thereby enticing the player to continue. In short, video games, just like comics, work because they tap into and manipulate the agency-expectation-surprise dynamics of daily life. And the really good creators are those who masterfully manipulate expectation-surprise dynamics in ways that keep the reader enthusiastically engaged.

In closing, our multiscale-coherence approach to *Invincible* provides a unique take on the violence-morality issues currently at work in antihero narratives. Do superheroes still work? Yes. Are they the same types of people they were decades ago? No. And perhaps, neither are we. Does this make us better? Does it make us worse? Instead of framing the issue in terms

of final judgements or right and wrong, as was the case in heroic comics of the past, the non-cynical lesson of *Invincible* is to remind us of the contextually-bound nature of all expectations. Will humans harbor expectations 50 years from now? Yes. And though their content will most assuredly differ from now, the fact that we will necessarily create them, will not.

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CLOSURE
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Image Quotation of Past Events to Enforce Storyworld Continuity in John Byrne's *Fantastic Four*

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This paper will look at the way that the writer and artist John Byrne used ›image quotation‹, in the form of direct and indirect quotation of panels by other artists to disrupt existing storyworld continuity and enforce his own version during his lengthy run on Marvel's *Fantastic Four* series. This was done by embedding previous continuity into stories through image quotation, but also by introducing new elements of his own devising within these pre-existing panels, and then reinforcing the ›canonicity‹ of this revised history through further quotation.

First it will define what is meant by ›image quotation‹, before considering the idea of different types of authorship in corporate-owned texts. It will then use three examples from Byrne's run – *This Land Is Mine* in *Fantastic Four* #247 (Byrne 1982), *Interlude* in *Fantastic Four* #258 (Byrne 1983) and *True Lies* in *Fantastic Four* #278 (Byrne and Ordway) – to show how he skilfully used the practice of image quotation to manipulate and add to the backstory of Doctor Doom and thus assert his own claim to ownership of the character.

Image Quotation

The term ›image quotation‹ is used here to refer to the specific transtextual practice of drawing story panels in comics text so that they consciously echo panels from previous stories. For example, the image below (fig. 1) shows a panel from *Fantastic Four* #278 (Byrne and Ordway) which consciously echoes a panel from *Fantastic Four Annual* #2 (Lee, Kirby and Stone).

Here Byrne is using a specific image to tell the reader that he is referring directly to a key event in the larger continuity of the extended Marvel storyworld. In this way the image is

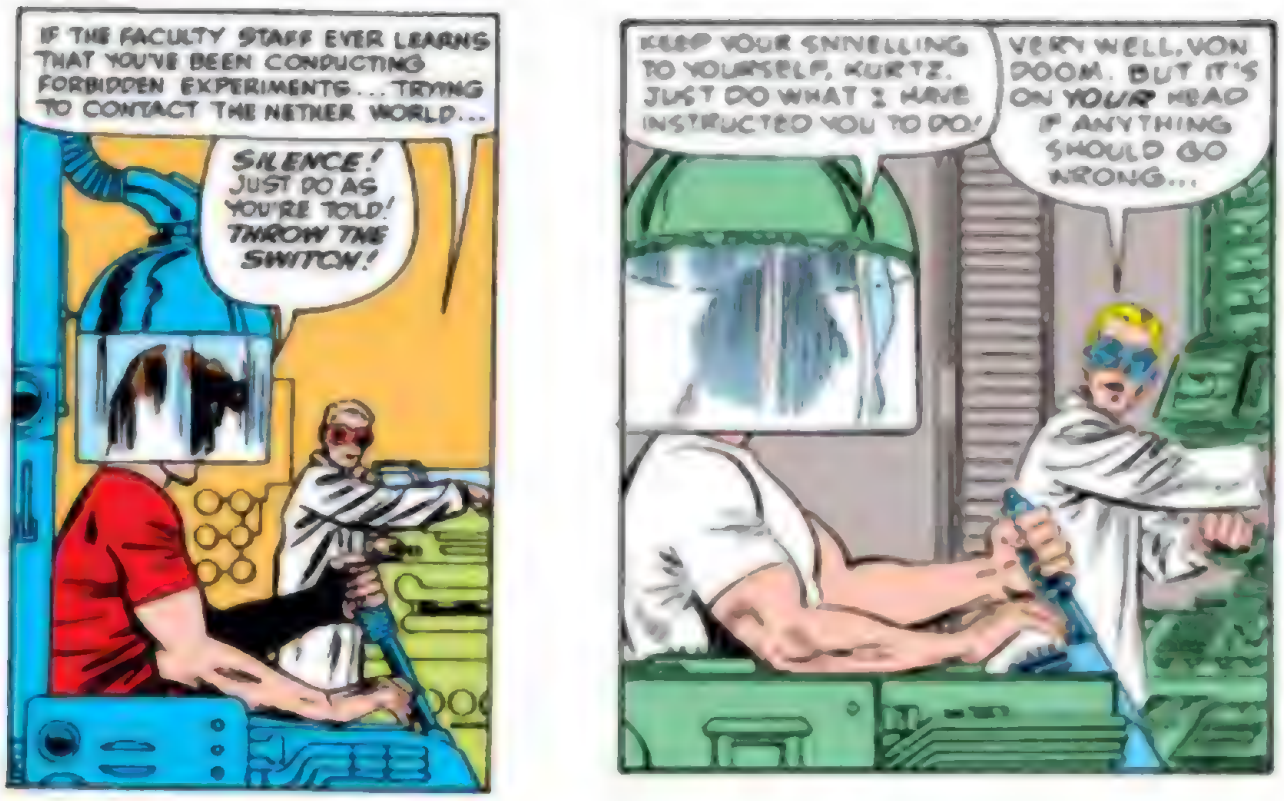

Fig. 1: John Byrne (1985) quoting an image by Jack Kirby (1964).

›transtextual‹, in that it operates across different texts which relate and refer to each other (Genette, 83–84). Within this context it is both intertextual, as it features one work referencing another, and hypertextual, in that the redrawn image makes a link to the earlier one, connecting them for the reader.

This practice was widely used in Marvel comics from the beginnings of the ›Marvel Universe‹ storyworld in the 1960s through to the emergence of the Direct Market in the 1990s as a way to remind or inform readers of previous events in continuity, with a panel, or sequence of panels, repeated as a ›clip‹ from an earlier issue, in the same way that a television show might insert a clip from a previous episode into a new one as a way to remind viewers of what had gone before. During this time the use of continuity between titles grew, so that readers would often need to have knowledge of a range of previous events to understand the story, but would not have had reliable access to the comics that the stories appeared in, nor any way to catch-up without finding the original publications (Tucker, 134). Thus, image quotation was introduced as a straightforward means of reminding the reader of plotlines continuing from previous issues.

Re-drawing panels can be used for other purposes than image quotation. ›Swiping‹, for example, is the practice of tracing and then altering images by other artists without acknowledgement as a ›cheat‹ to avoid designing a new layout (Crucifix, 315). This is essentially a

time-saving exercise on the part of an artist who chooses to copy the work of another without credit. ›Swiping‹ itself differs from ›pastiche‹, whereby iconic images are knowingly restaged in a way that allows readers to be in on the joke, sometimes explicitly stating that this is the case (Labarre, 231). This practice is also transtextual, referring back to previous texts or styles, such as on the cover of *Giant-Size X-Statix* #1 (Milligan and Allred) (fig. 2) which pastiches the cover of *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (Wein and Cockrum).

Here the intention is to reward the reader's knowledge of comics history by reminding them of an old image (Groensteen, 89). In this case the particular previous cover is used as a way to inform prospective purchasers of the comic that the story inside features the introduction of a new team, as was the case for its famous predecessor, but also that it is done with a knowing, transtextual, eye on previous continuity.

In none of these cases is there any suggestion that the image displayed is the exact same event as shown in the original, and this is where image quotation differs from these other practices. Image quotation is the re-use of a specific rendering of a previous event in order to make an explicit statement that the same event is being shown again, hence its frequent use for flashbacks.

Fig. 2: Milligan and Allred pastiche Wein and Cockrum.

Flashbacks within the stories themselves began to fall out of fashion during the 1990s, when the emergence of the Direct Market and growth in comic stores meant that fans could be sure of getting a regular supply of comics, without missing issues due to the vagaries of newsstand distribution, as well as the growing availability of reprints of popular stories as the market in trade paperback collections grew (Tucker, 139). In the early 2000s the practice of including textual ›recap‹ pages at the start of each issue became common, too, beginning in Marvel's ›Ultimate Marvel‹ line of comics and then spreading across the industry (Marvel database). This was done with the intention of allowing new readers to catch up with everything that had happened previously, and further reduced the need for in-story recaps.

John Byrne's lengthy run as writer and artist on *The Fantastic Four* took place between 1981 and 1986, long before the inclusion of flashbacks fell out of use, so he would regularly employ this type of image quotation to bring readers up to speed with the story. However, as will be shown in the next section, he also used it in more complex ways to exert his own authority over Marvel continuity and thus to assert himself as a primary author of the characters and a successor to the creators, Stan Lee and especially Jack Kirby.

John Byrne and Authorship

A useful way to understand ›authorship‹ in comics texts, particularly superhero comics texts, is to follow Matthew Freeman's suggestion of splitting it into two ›author-functions‹: that of a ›market author-function‹ and a ›textual author-function‹ (Freeman 2016, 37). The market author-function relates to Foucault's ›indicative function‹, focusing on the way that the presence of an author's name guides readers to what is inside and to what other texts exist (Foucault, 324). During John Byrne's run on *Fantastic Four* the main market authors would include Marvel comics, whose corporate ownership is proclaimed on the cover, but also Stan Lee, who ›presented‹ almost every Marvel comic published during the 1970s and 1980s.

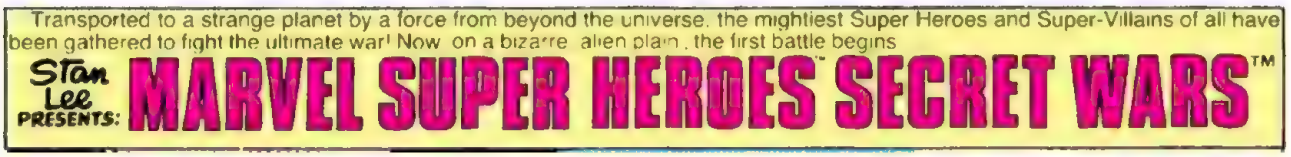

Fig. 3: Example of »Stan Lee Presents« as Market Authorship in *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars* #2 (Shooter, Zeck and Beatty).

In the example above (fig. 3) the phrase »Stan Lee Presents« is used to sell the contents of this comic as officially a Marvel story that exists within the same ›Marvel Universe‹ story-world that Lee co-created. This, along with the words »Marvel Comics« on the cover, assures

the potential purchaser that what they will find inside is a genuine, canonical, Marvel comic. This was especially important at this time, when Marvel comics as a whole were regarded by fans as more ›real‹ and ›hip‹ than those of other superhero publishers (Reynolds, 9). This practice is widespread in genre fiction that features recurring adventures by popular characters, for instance in the use of the name »Edgar Rice Burroughs« as part of the branding of Tarzan, »Ian Fleming« in James Bond movies or spin-off books, even when the actual stories told have nothing to do with the characters' original creators (Freeman 2015, 54).

John Byrne would occasionally attempt to assert himself as a market author of the *Fantastic Four* series, notably by placing himself on the cover of *Fantastic Four* #238 (Byrne 1982) and as a main character within the story itself in *Fantastic Four* #262 (Byrne 1984). In both of these cases he was proclaiming that this was not just the *Fantastic Four*, but *John Byrne's Fantastic Four*.

However, it is in his claims to textual authorship that image quotation is used most powerfully. The textual author-function relates to the power individual authors have over the storyworld they are in the act of creating (Freeman 2016, 37). In comics terms this would include not just the traditional writers and artists who fans might think of as ›creators‹, but all of the letterers, colourists and editorial staff who also appear in the credits. Traditionally, superhero comics are almost always created by a team of creators, with different individuals responsible for the writing and art (often split into pencillers and inkers) before being passed on to letterers, colourists and so on. Multiple writers, pencillers and inkers are also not uncommon.

This was not the case with John Byrne's run on *Fantastic Four*, which ran from issue 232 to 293, with the covers dated July 1981 to August 1986. He wrote all 62 issues, pencilled 61 – *Fantastic Four* #266 (Byrne and Gammill) was an unused inventory story drawn by Kerry Gammill which Byrne repurposed, and inked, as a flashback story –, inked 42 and, in the case of *Fantastic Four* #273 (Byrne 1984), wrote, pencilled, inked and lettered it, too. In addition, he wrote three annuals (two of which he pencilled) and 22 issues of the spin-off series *The Thing* (GCD Project).

However, although Byrne did not directly collaborate on a monthly basis with as many other creators as might usually be expected, the nature of the ›Marvel Universe‹ as a transtextual storyworld, in which every story in every comic interacts with every other one, meant that Byrne was in effect still collaborating with all other creators of Marvel comics, past, present and even future. Therefore, stories told by other creators could and did change the meaning of his own stories, and Byrne came to see this as a challenge to his own authority as the sole writer of *The Fantastic Four*. As will be shown, he would seek to assert that his stories were the primary sources of ›truth‹ within the storyworld by repurposing the work of other creators within his own. Image quotation would be used as a key tool in this process.

This will be demonstrated with three examples, each featuring the character Doctor Doom. Doctor Doom began as an antagonist for the Fantastic Four and, although that has

been his primary position ever since, in comics and other media, he would also be used in other storylines throughout the Marvel universe. This meant that, unlike the Fantastic Four themselves, Doom could be borrowed by other creators for other series without necessarily discussing his use with Byrne or other members of the *Fantastic Four* series' editorial team. Thus, by examining the way Byrne sought to adapt and control other storylines featuring Doctor Doom, we can see plentiful examples of his use of image quotation to assert his own authorship.

This Land Is Mine

The first example comes from *This Land Is Mine*, a story first published in Fantastic Four #247 (Byrne 1982). In this story Doom has summoned the *Fantastic Four* to his home country of Latveria, a small, fictional, Eastern European nation which was first introduced in *Fantastic Four Annual* #2 (Lee, Kirby and Stone), with Doom already installed as its tyrannical ruler. Since then he had been deposed in a revolution aided by the *Fantastic Four* which climaxed in Fantastic Four #200 (Wolfman, Pollard and Sinnott). This story ended with hereditary ruler Prince Zorba installed as temporary ruler until democratic elections could be held to elect a new government.

Normally in a superhero story it is an unequivocal good to take power away from a supervillain, but here we discover that this has not been the case. As Doom informs the team, the revolution has been a disaster. Prince Zorba has refused to cede control or hold elections and Latveria has become a failed state under his rulership, as dictatorial as Doom's but significantly less efficient. While he is explaining this, a young boy called Kristoff runs out into the street and collides with Doom. His mother runs out to beg for mercy, as one might expect, but when she realises it is Doom rather than Prince Zorba's secret police she falls to her knees in relief and says »Oh master, how we have prayed you might return to us!« (Byrne 1982, 5). »I smell a set-up« (Byrne 1982, 5) says The Thing, and he'd be right to think so, as Doom has a long history of forcing his subjects into public displays of affection. Any reader familiar with Doctor Doom's history would also expect that this is a fake, and so Byrne attempts to demonstrate that she is telling the truth by using image quotation, having Kristoff's mother explain how Latveria used to be a »happy kingdom« (Byrne 1982, 6) over a flashback image which directly quotes one from the very first appearance of Latveria in *Fantastic Four Annual* #2 (Lee, Kirby and Stone).

The original image (fig. 4) shows Doom walking the streets of Latveria with ordinary citizens bowing happily to him. Obviously this could be an expression born out of fear, but the image includes a thought bubble with one citizen thinking, approvingly, »Ours has been a prosperous land since he has ruled us!« (Lee, Kirby and Stone, 12).

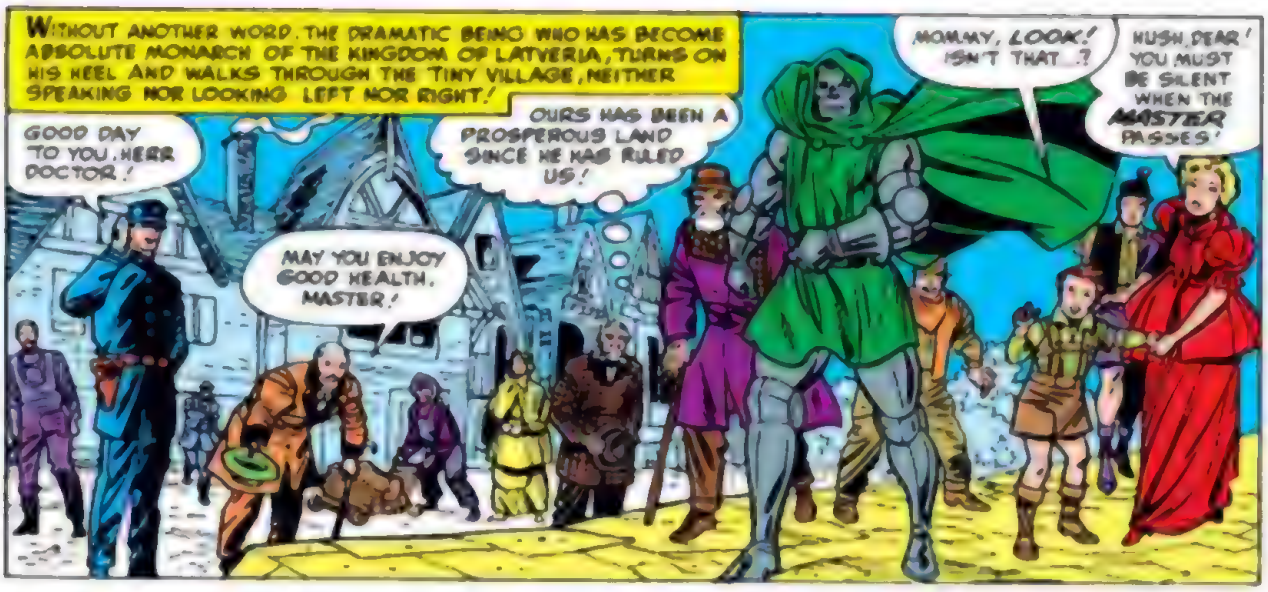

Fig. 4: Doctor Doom and his people in *Fantastic Four Annual* #2 (Lee, Kirby and Stone).

The message of the original story was that Doom was genuinely loved by his people and, by quoting this image, Byrne reminds the reader of this. Byrne's panel layout (fig. 5) is very similar, with a policeman, bowing citizen, mother and child and even similar buildings, but he has chosen to alter the angle from which the scene is viewed. Redrawing the image in this way must have been a deliberate decision, used to suggest that this version of Doom's relationship to Latveria is the same, but literally seen from a different angle.

The image is drawn from a slightly different position, too, which suggests that Byrne is placing his own viewpoint next to, and possibly even in front of, that of the original artist Jack Kirby. Byrne had long acknowledged his debt to Kirby, and stated his intention that his version of the Fantastic Four should be in the spirit of the original run of the series. Therefore, it could be argued that, as well as fulfilling the usual functions of image quotation to provide context for readers, this

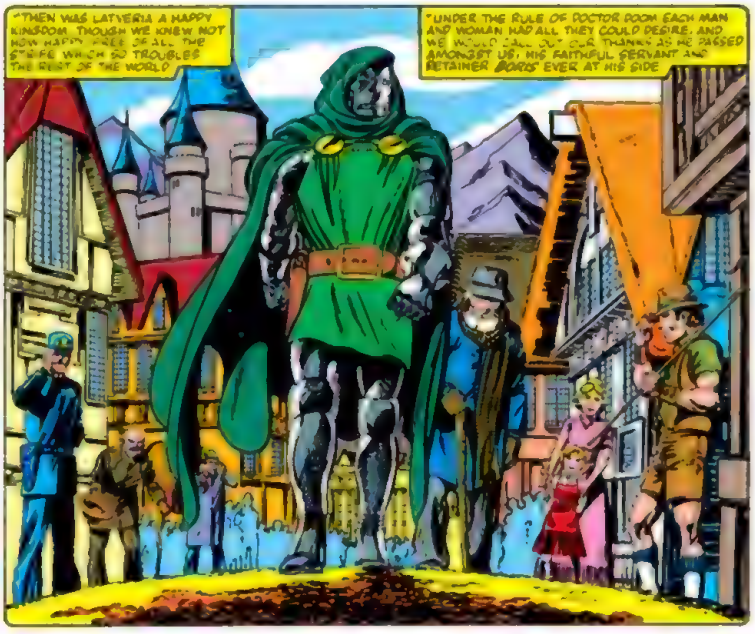

Fig. 5: Byrne quotes Kirby in *Fantastic Four* #247 (Byrne 1982).

positioning is a way for Byrne to imply that he believes he ›stands beside‹ Jack Kirby as an artistic equal (Gandolfo, 772).

Byrne uses further image quotation in the story, notably an image of the Latverian state's army of ›Killer Robots‹, which quotes a similar image from their previous appearance in *Fantastic Four* #85 (Lee, Kirby and Sinnott 1969). This re-appearance of aspects of previous continuity not only reinforces the idea that it is part of the same cohesive storyworld, and therefore as valid as Kirby and Lee's stories, but also services the story by demonstrating how evil Zorba has become, using Doom's own weapons against the people.

The story ends with Doctor Doom murdering Prince Zorba – he is, after all, still Doctor Doom – and retaking control of Latveria. At the conclusion he orders the Fantastic Four to leave his country, threatening them with death if they return. This, however, is not the end for Byrne's examination of Doctor Doom and Latveria, with the series returning to the country a year later in *Fantastic Four* #258 (Byrne 1983).

Interlude

Described on the first page as »Stan Lee presents perhaps the strangest issue ever of the Fantastic Four!«, this issue does not feature the title characters at all. Instead, it is John Byrne's attempt to weave together almost every recent appearance of Doom into a single narrative, which he alone is in control of.

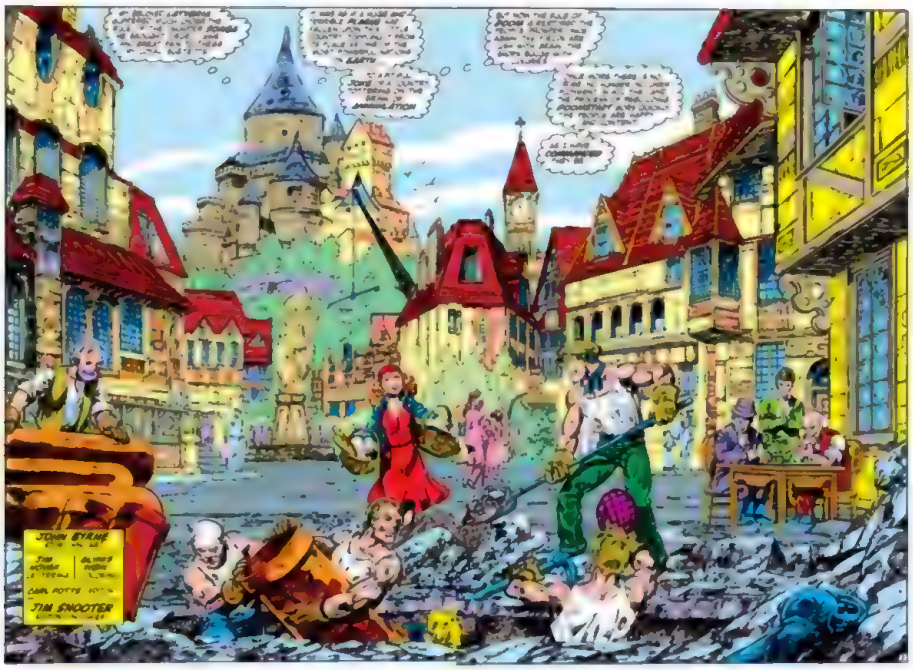

Fig. 6: Byrne quotes himself in *Fantastic Four* #258 (Byrne 1983).

The story begins with a double splash page (fig. 6) detailing the repairs which have been undertaken since the last story set in Latveria. This image is a quotation of the splash page from *This Land Is Mine* in *Fantastic Four* #247 (Byrne 1982) featuring the same fountain, houses, statuary and clock tower, now being rebuilt under Doom's guidance. This is a direct transtextual link back to the previous story, informing the reader that it is a continuation.

Interestingly, the only significant change from the previous image is to the design of Castle Doom in the background, which here has been altered to match the design seen in *Fantastic Four* #87 (Lee, Kirby and Sinnott 1969) (fig. 7). Again, Byrne is reinforcing the idea that this is the same storyworld as Kirby's.

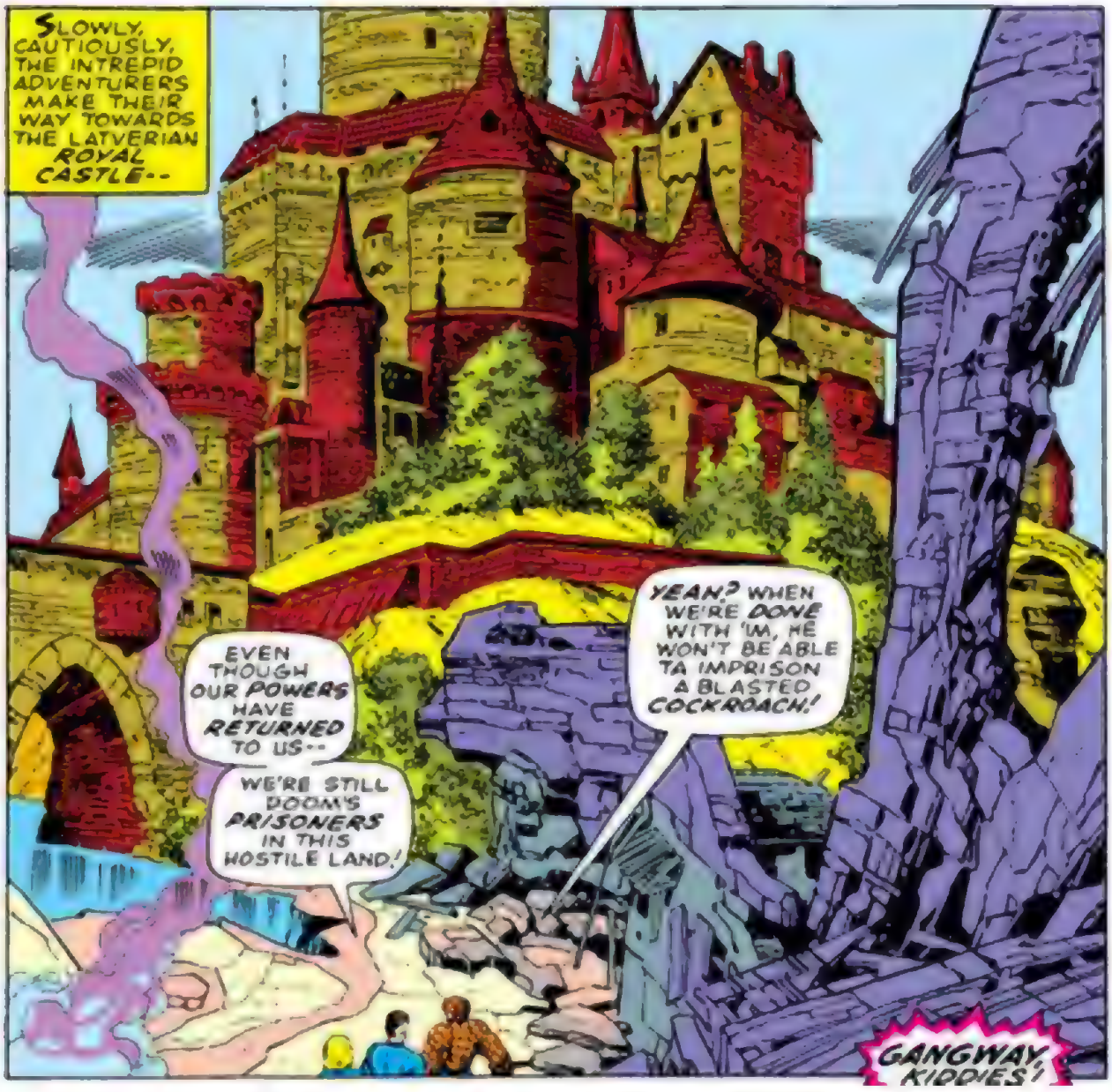

Fig. 7: Castle Doom as seen in *Fantastic Four* #87 (Lee, Kirby and Sinnott 1969).

Byrne then goes on to integrate various recent Doctor Doom stories into his own narrative, firstly by repeating a conversation which had previously been seen in *Doctor Strange* #57 (Stern, Nowlan and Austin). The dialogue in each instance is identical, but again Byrne shows events from a slightly different angle (fig. 8), and then continues Doom's side of the conversation, implying that Byrne's telling of the encounter is more complete, and thus more definitive.

He does this again on the following page by integrating – and re-writing – another appearance by Doom, this time from *Uncanny X-Men* #146 (Claremont, Cockrum and Rubinstein). This issue, written by Byrne's former regular collaborator Chris Claremont, featured Doom teaming up with the super-villain Arcade to fight the X-Men. Byrne was unhappy with Claremont using a character which he felt belonged to him. Therefore, he retrospectively rewrote the story so that it was a Doombot – one of Doom's robot replicas – rather than Doom himself who was featured in the issue (Shooter 2011). This Doombot is found to be defective and destroyed for not acting correctly, an occurrence which could

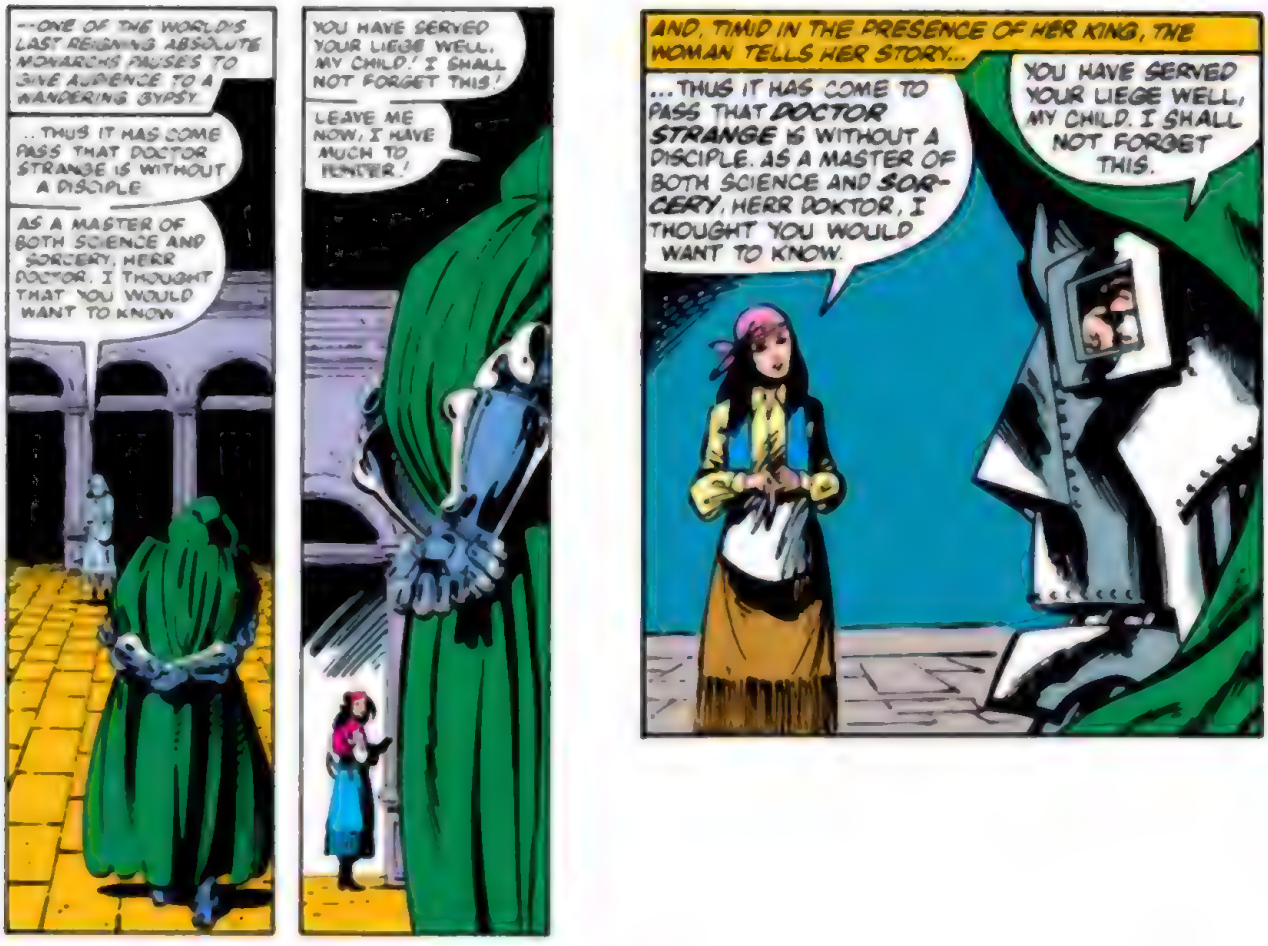

Fig. 8: Dialogue and imagery from *Doctor Strange* #57 (Stern, Nowlan and Austin) (left) quoted in *Fantastic Four* #258 (Byrne 1983) (right).

be interpreted as an in-continuity way for Byrne, as the character's ›owner‹, to declare that Claremont's depiction of Doom was not up to standard.

Doom takes young Kristoff – now his ward – on a tour through the castle, during which further image quotation occurs, including another from the Silver Surfer's first meeting with Doom in *Fantastic Four* #57 (Lee, Kirby and Sinnott 1966). Once again Byrne chooses to draw events from a slightly different angle (fig. 9), this time to indicate that this new version comes from Doctor Doom's point of view, not the Silver Surfer's.

Two further stories are then added, both featuring the Hauptmann brothers. In *Fantastic Four* #87 (Lee, Kirby and Sinnott 1969) Doom murdered the elder Hauptmann brother, who was endangering Doom's art collection while attempting to kill Reed Richards with a flame thrower. Some years later, in *Fantastic Four Annual* #15 (Moench and Sutton), the younger brother was forced to go to work for Doom in his laboratories. Byrne reveals that the surviving brother has been plotting his revenge ever since and has devised a cosmic ray device that will kill his employer. Unfortunately for him, Doom instantly sees through the ruse and uses the device to murder Hauptmann himself instead.

Following this, Byrne brings in yet another piece of recent continuity, sending two robots to kidnap a prisoner from a hospital recently featured in *Marvel Two-In-One* #96 (DeFalco, Wilson and Esposito). Doom had a very minor cameo in this issue, appearing in an image quotation that referred, like the story itself, to *Fantastic Four Annual* #3 (Lee, Kirby and Colletta).

All of this image quotation and continuity grappling is designed to bring together the character's various recent appearances into a single cohesive whole, demonstrating to readers (and possibly fellow creators) that Byrne's version of Doctor Doom is the definitive one.

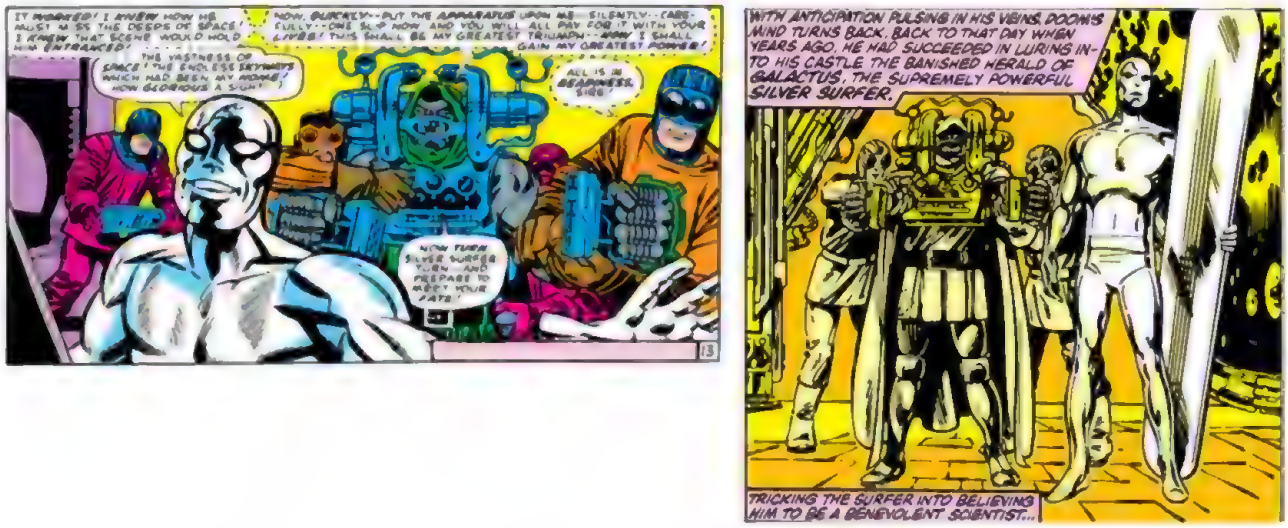

Fig. 9: Quoting *Fantastic Four* #57 (Lee, Kirby and Sinnott 1966). (left) quoted in *Fantastic Four* #258 (Byrne 1983) (right).

This assurance becomes highly relevant two issues later, in *Fantastic Four* #260 (Byrne 1983), when Doctor Doom is killed in battle in a story entitled *When Titans Clash!*, the title itself a reference to a story of the same name published five years earlier in the aforementioned *Fantastic Four* #200 (Wolfman, Pollard and Sinnott). Doom has been killed, or rather has appeared to be killed, many times before, with the character always escaping certain death, often by turning out to be a Doombot or other doppelganger. Here, by constantly reassuring the reader that this is the one true Doctor Doom, Byrne is building the case for his death being »real«, rather than a trick.

Of course, Doom would eventually return, but that would not be until some years later, in *Fantastic Four* #287 (Byrne and Sinnott), where it is revealed that he used yet another piece of continuity to escape, in this case the body-swapping powers he received from a race of aliens called the Ovoids in *Fantastic Four* #10 (Lee, Kirby and Ayers). In the meantime, the ›Marvel Universe‹ and all of the stories within it would continue as if he had truly died, and the final text examined here will look at what that meant for Latveria, and for Kristoff.

True Lies

True Lies was published in *Fantastic Four* #278 (Byrne and Ordway). It reveals that Doom had not adopted Kristoff out of the goodness of his heart, but rather to be an available body who could host Doom's mind in the event of his death. With Doom now officially dead, this plan comes into effect: Doombots strap Kristoff into a contraption which wipes his own mind and then begins to fill it up with Doom's memories instead.

This process gives Byrne an opportunity to re-tell Doom's origin, as the information is fed into Kristoff's brain in the form of an ongoing narrative. The re-telling of an origin story is often used by creative teams as a way to stamp their mark on characters (Reynolds, 48). Usually this occurs at the start of a run on a series, and Byrne had indeed carried out a similar exercise with the Fantastic Four themselves in his fifth issue, *Fantastic Four* #236 (Byrne 1981). This comic used direct image quotation of the origin story in *Fantastic Four* #1 (Lee, Kirby, Klein and Rule) throughout, in order to highlight the fact that it was referring to the very first origin story. Byrne's intention here was to ally himself with the Stan Lee and Jack Kirby version of the series, implying that his version was a continuation of theirs – an idea that had already been suggested by the title of his first issue, *Back To Basics* in *Fantastic Four* #232 (Byrne 1981).

In *True Lies*, however, Byrne is doing something very different. After building up his own authorship of the character in the previous issues examined here, he now uses his authority to make radical changes, while still being at pains to ground the character in what has gone

Fig. 10: Different versions of the death of Doom's father from (top to bottom) 1964, 1969 and 1985.

before. For this he combines aspects of the original full version of Doom's origin in *Fantastic Four Annual* #2 (Lee, Kirby and Stone) and the first major revision to it from *Marvel Superheroes* #20 (Lieber, Thomas, Giacoia and Colletta), using these texts as the foundations for the radical alterations which occur in his own new interpretation.

All three versions of the origin story begin with the death of Doom's father. The original 1964 version is directly quoted in 1969, and then again from a different angle in 1985 (fig. 10).

Similarly, all three versions follow this with young Victor von Doom's discovery of his mother's potions, which reveal her to be a witch (fig. 11).

The 1969 version adds new information to the original by introducing Valeria, his childhood sweetheart, and showing her to have been at Victor's side throughout the incident. The artist, Frank Giacoia, highlights the fact that this is the same story but carrying different information by showing it from a slightly different angle, in much the same way that Byrne does. Byrne keeps the addition of Valeria in his version, and is careful to copy aspects such as the design of the trunk in order to illustrate continuity, even though he changes the dialogue slightly.

The biggest change, however, comes at the crucial point in Doctor Doom's origin story when his face is horribly scarred, forcing him to flee society and eventually become a super-

Fig. 11: Different versions of Doom's discovery of his mother's potions from (clockwise from top left) 1964, 1969 and 1985.

villain. This was first shown in Doom's very first appearance in *Fantastic Four* #5 (Lee, Kirby and Sinnott 1962), and then repeated almost exactly in *Fantastic Four Annual* #2 (Lee, Kirby and Stone) with Jack Kirby using image quotation to refer back to his own original story. This is a famous sequence of layouts (at least amongst fans and creators of superhero comics) and has been quoted in this way many times. Byrne follows this tradition by very deliberately illustrating the sequence using exactly the same layouts (fig. 12), demonstrating to the reader that this is the same story that they are familiar with from other re-tellings.

Fig. 12: Different versions of Doom's accident from (top to bottom) 1962, 1964 and 1985.

The sequence usually continues with an image first seen in *Fantastic Four Annual* #2 (Lee, Kirby and Stone) of Doom smashing a mirror in horror at his new face, but here Byrne inserts an entirely new panel which, for the first time ever, reveals Doom's face immediately after the accident (fig. 13).

Nesting this additional panel within the traditional sequence is Byrne's way of telling the reader that this is exactly the same story that they have seen before, just with additional information. This is reinforced by the fact that the viewpoint used in the quoted panels is exactly the same as in previous versions. The message is that this is explicitly not a re-interpretation, but rather a straight retelling that happens to show a panel that has not been seen before.

The idea that Doom was only mildly scarred beneath his mask was first suggested by Jack Kirby, although there is some dispute as to whether this was the original intent for the character, or if it was an idea Kirby had some years later (Cronin). Either way, here it is Byrne, asserting himself as Kirby's equal, who is placing it into continuity, using the power of his own authorship over the character to do so. By demonstrating his own knowledge and mastery of the character over the previous two years Byrne is able to carry out this act of redefinition as a way of establishing himself as one of the primary authors of Doctor Doom.

The story continues with Byrne re-affirming the importance of past events to the identity of the character by having Kristoff-Doom order the Doombots to stop the memory-upload process, declaring »I have no need for further memories«. Byrne here is giving space to a

Fig. 13: The next two panels in Byrne's version of the sequence.

counter-argument which states that past events are not actually that important to a character, and then uses the rest of the story to demonstrate that this is incorrect. Without the full knowledge of what has happened in the past Kristoff-Doom is easily defeated by the Fantastic Four, who have changed and developed since their earliest meetings with Doom. This shows that, although Kristoff-Doom does have many of Doctor Doom's characteristics – the name Doctor Doom, ways of speaking and behaving, his castle in Latveria, the Doombots and so on – without full access to the character's history and continuity, he cannot be the true character. Furthermore, it is Byrne, and Byrne alone, who is the sole arbiter of these vital character components.

Conclusion

Throughout each of these stories John Byrne uses image quotation as a way to inform readers that he is referring to pre-existing storylines and to indicate, through a manipulation of viewing angles, where he is either repeating or re-interpreting events. In this way he attempts to simultaneously reinforce what has gone before and also subtly change it, and by doing this also reinforce his own position as a pre-eminent author of this particular character. The success or failure of this attempt can be assessed by looking at how the character has changed in the several decades since John Byrne left the series.

Many aspects of Doctor Doom's character have been altered by subsequent authors. Doom's facial scarring, for instance, has been healed several times, notably in *Marvel Superheroes Secret Wars* (Shooter, Zeck, Layton, Beatty, Abel and Esposito) and its spiritual successor *Secret Wars* (Hickman and Ribić), while he has also lost control of Latveria on many occasions, too. However, these changes have always reverted back to the model created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, and subsequently reinforced by Byrne.

Similarly, Doom's nature as a noble, almost heroic character has fluctuated. Mark Waid, during his own notable run on the title with Mike Weiringo from 2002 to 2005, described him as someone who would »tear the head off a newborn baby and eat it like an apple while his mother watched if it would somehow prove he were smarter than Reed« (Terjesen, 83). Other versions have similarly varied, but it is most often the noble but flawed Doctor Doom, with his own code of ethics, which tends to be portrayed, especially when he is given his own series or is seen in other media, such as cartoons, films and games. This is very much Byrne's version of the character, even more so than that of Lee and Kirby themselves, who would often portray him as a maniacal tyrant towards the end of their run together on *Fantastic Four*.

In more general terms, Byrne's run on *Fantastic Four* is held to be one of the most important in the series' long history, often placed second only to Lee and Kirby's in terms of quality

and importance for the formation of the characters (Avila; Buxton; Van As). Later creators have often challenged or re-used aspects of Byrne's run, with Walt Simonson, for example, suggesting in *Fantastic Four* #350 (Simonson and Milgrom) that the Doom seen in all of Byrne's stories was actually a Doombot. Many years later, in *Loki: Agent Of Asgard* #6 (Ewing and Coelho), Al Ewing and Jorge Coelho would include a brief piece of dialogue, re-writing Byrne's revision of Claremont's story, stating that it was Doom himself after all, and that he had allowed Arcade to strike a match against his armour in order to »maintain confusion« (Ewing and Coelho, 15) about his true identity.

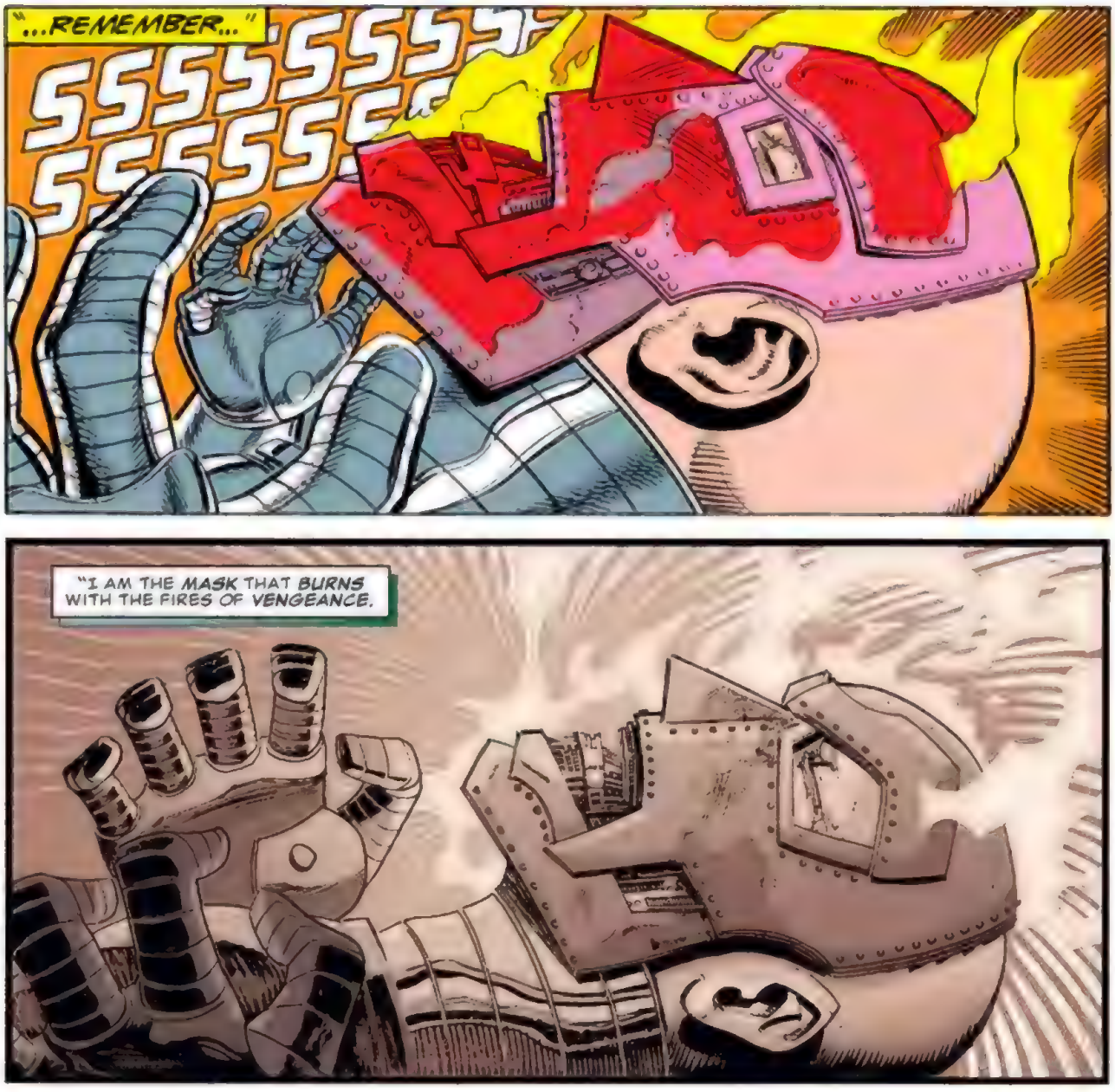

Fig. 14: Byrne's version of Doom's origin from 1985 (top) quoted by Ewing and Coelho in 2014 (bottom).

In general, though, these nods to Byrne's run have been playful tributes to the original rather than ›corrections‹, in much the same way that Byrne's own additions were in the spirit of Lee and Kirby before him. Indeed, Ewing and Coelho's version even uses image quotation of Byrne's version of Doom's origin story from *Fantastic Four* #278 (Byrne and Ordway) (gig. 14).

What this demonstrates is that, in an ongoing storyworld like the ›Marvel Universe‹, it is impossible for anyone, even a creator like John Byrne, who would write, pencil, ink and sometimes even letter his own stories, to maintain full control of any character. As the technique of image quotation demonstrates, any image used can be re-used, re-assessed and re-interpreted by future creators, thus making all creative work in this area collaborative in the end.

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CLOSURE
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Do The Collapse

Final Crisis and the Impossible Coherence of the Superhero Crossover

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Introduction

The origins of this article stem from a twofold obsession of mine: with the works of Grant Morrison and with the concept of the superhero crossover. Grant Morrison is one of the most important writers in contemporary comics. They have introduced a plethora of concepts and ideas from artistic vanguards and post-structural theory, mixing them with pop culture, while working on every major superhero belonging to DC Comics and on some of the most notable ones coming from Marvel.[1] Morrison is recognized both for their work on superheroes and also for their independent titles. They have legions of followers willing to analyze and deconstruct everything they publish, looking for clues for connections between their works. They can be rightfully called an auteur.

The second obsession concerns that strange beast called the superhero crossover. This narrative form, which takes all the characters of a certain superhero universe and puts them together, fighting to save the world, their lives and usually the entire universe, is a much-hated part of the reading experience of the genre. Meant to sell issues and make people buy as many comics as possible, it has become an unwieldy behemoth which pops its head once or twice (sometimes thrice!) in the course of a year, derailing self-contained stories in each title and making readers buy series they do not want in order to understand the intertwined story, or out of mere completism. As a corporate marketing gimmick, it represents the exact opposite of comics as an art form and auteurs as creators. However, one of the hallmarks of being a best-selling writer in superhero comics is to be given the task of writing that year's crossover. As such, these pieces of narrative benefit from an association with marquee names whilst remaining a commercial enterprise that is meant to promote a universe, not a particular author or character. The juxtaposition of commercial practices and creative impulses

inside a superhero universe has always been a fascinating topic for me, and the terrain of the crossover seems particularly apt for a discussion of tensions between aesthetic and profit-oriented considerations.

In this article I will analyze *Final Crisis*, written by Morrison and published by DC Comics in 2008–2009, in light of these conflicts but also to consider the question of coherence. Relying on the concepts of ›general arthrology‹ as proposed by Thierry Groensteen and of ›narrative collapse‹ as developed by Douglas Rushkoff, I aim to analyze *Final Crisis* as the logical endpoint of a tendency in superhero crossovers to slide towards incoherence. Nevertheless, my proposal here is that these theories need to be complimented by a historical perspective and an analysis of the production side of comics, particularly when we are dealing with genres, like superhero fiction, whose aims include the maximization of profit. Therefore, this article will also propose a genealogy and brief history of superhero crossovers, and will consider *Final Crisis*' production difficulties and place in the history of the genre as a postmodern comic. Accordingly, it relies on works like *Of Comics and Men* by Jean-Paul Gabilliet and Mark Rogers' article *Political Economy. Manipulating Demand and The Death of Superman*.

Some of the questions I address here are: What do superhero crossovers purport to do? How is *Final Crisis* related to *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and to the decades-old debate about the DC Comics multiverse? What ideas about superhero stories does *Final Crisis* propose? How did the process of its production impact its themes and the reception by its audience? How can arthrology actually ›work‹ in a superhero crossover, which by its very nature is meant to connect with the entirety of a fictional universe across multiple titles?

Groensteen and Rushkoff's theories of coherence in relation to the superhero genre

Groensteen's arthrology has been widely discussed and applied in a multitude of analyses, from Eddie Campbell's *Alec* (Fischer and Hatfield), to webcomics (Jacobs), to *Tintin* (Carpintero) and to the *Walking Dead* (Round). It has also been challenged (Cohn 2010). It could be argued that it is the most influential semiotic theory of comics in the early 21st Century. Groensteen's is a theory of linking, of networking, of making sense. It treats comics as an art form with a definitive start and ending, a discrete unit[2] from which certain meanings and connections can be extracted. It also presupposes that the primary function of comics is narrative. Groensteen pays particular attention to the image, since »every panel exists, potentially if not actually, in relation with each of the others« (Groensteen, 146). As he puts it: »comics is not only an art of fragments, of scattering, of distribution; it is also an art of conjunction, of repetition, of linking together« (Groensteen, 22). And it is also a theory of reading, because it presupposes, quoting Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre,

»a reading capable of searching, beyond linear relations, to the aspects or fragments of panels susceptible to being networked with certain aspects or fragments of other panels« (Groensteen, 146).

Groensteen considers comics a combination of two subjects of expression (drawing and writing) and a collection of codes which are simultaneously mobilized when they are constituted (Groensteen, 6). As such, he proposes that the analyst must »find an access road to the interior of the system that permits exploration in its totality so as to find coherence« (Groensteen, 6). Groensteen divides the system of comics into the spatio-topical apparatus, the formal distribution of units and spaces which, for him, are »the preliminary conditions to every beginning, and the constraints that never cease to inform each phase of creation« (Groensteen, 21). Inside this system there are relations between images of a linear type, which he calls ›restricted arthrology‹, and relations which are more distant and translinear, which are described under the concepts of ›general arthrology‹ and ›braiding‹. Braiding is particularly important, as it takes images and sequences and derives a series from them, defined by Groensteen as »a succession of continuous or discontinuous images linked by a system of iconic, plastic or semantic correspondences«, as opposed to a sequence which »is a succession of images where the syntagmic linking is determined by a narrative project« (Groensteen, 146). Through braiding the analyst can access the themes, topics and aesthetic callbacks which structure a comic beyond its narrative thrust.

Cohn's criticism of Groensteen hinges on the lack of specificity that his theory of connectedness between the images in a comic has. He first points out that the amount of connections within even a short comic would be too much for human memory to process (Cohn 2010, 138) and then proposes that Groensteen's theories »have no substantial processes to describe other than a vague sense of connectedness« (Cohn 2010, 142). His proposal, which would be expounded at length in his first book (Cohn 2013), is that the processing of images by the human mind »must be guided by explicit rules and constraints that involve hierarchic structures beyond linear and/or vague thematic relationships between panels« (Cohn 2010, 144).

My own criticism of the limits of Groensteen's theory runs counter to what Cohn proposes. I believe that coherence in comics is influenced by factors which are more encompassing than just the semiotic organization of the work. The history of a certain genre and the place certain works have inside of it, the clichés associated with said genre, the political economy of comics and the way the work force inside its industry is organized and exploited, the reactions of its readers, all have an impact on the question of coherence. This mainly sociological and historical approach to coherence will be the focus of this article.

Superhero comics, in particular, never end: there is always the next adventure, and this adventure is also a commercial enterprise. The crossover takes this tendency to its apex: an endless barrage of material handled by an army of writers, artists, inkers, colorists, letterers and editors, involving hundreds of characters with their own convoluted fictional histories and

complex interrelations. In theory, a crossover should be linked across all titles, should tell a complete story, should be a grand opera in which all parts work in unison. But, in reality, what we usually get is chaos, destruction, narrative incoherence, contradictions between different series and versions of its characters, and, when it ends, it has usually raised more problems than it solved. This failure becomes apparent in the usual practice after the crossover, which is the relaunch, for which publishing houses retool their line, usually with new creators, promising that characters and stories will be more accessible and their quality will be improved.

It is here that I think it is appropriate to introduce Douglas Rushkoff's concept of ›narrative collapse‹. Rushkoff is a completely different type of thinker than Groensteen. He is an essayist and media theorist who is concerned with the new social forms of interaction bred by technologies. He used to be associated with cyberpunk culture and has written extensively and critically on social media. In his 2013 book *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* Rushkoff turns his eye to the phenomenon of the acceleration of data input that human beings are confronted with in contemporary times and to the simultaneity of events impacting the lives of citizens all over the world. He divides this phenomenon into five different aspects: a) Narrative collapse: how pop culture narratives (and the narratives of our lives) have lost all meaning and eschewed the traditional structure of introduction-conflict-resolution: »The beginning, the middle and the end have almost no meaning. The gist is experienced in each moment as new connections are made and false stories are exposed or reframed« (Rushkoff, 27), which is particularly important because »Experiencing the world as a series of stories helps create a sense of context. It is comforting and orienting« (Rushkoff, 15); b) Digiphrenia: »the way our media and technologies encourage us to be in more than one place at the same time« (Rushkoff, 10); c) Overwinding: »the effort to squish really big timescales into much smaller ones« (Rushkoff, 10); d) Fractalnoia: the loss of history and the attempt to explain everything in terms of pattern recognition in the present tense; and finally e) Apocalypto: the way this infinite present makes us think about and yearn for conclusions, which is reflected in pop culture in our obsession with the apocalypse.

I will be focusing here on narrative collapse, but many of these phenomena are equally applicable to the superhero genre in general and the superhero crossover in particular. Rushkoff argues that »we tend to exist in a distracted present, where forces on the periphery are magnified and those immediately before us are ignored. Our ability to create a plan (…) is undermined by our need to be able to improvise our way through any number of external impacts« (Rushkoff, 8). This is exactly the feeling of reading contemporary superhero comics: nothing ever stands on its own, because the characters and authors are continuously derailed by the impact of events and crossovers.

Many crossovers, *Final Crisis* particularly amongst them, thematize decay, crisis and extreme situations which lead to a loss of meaning. They also deal with infinity: nothing ever ends, no story is ever complete, each event generates anticipation for the next one. They

are also a form likely to induce narrative collapse in the way that they sprawl over a huge number of titles and demand substantial previous knowledge from readers. Crossovers have become increasingly metafictional in recent decades, commenting on different eras of the superhero genre, rejecting and trying to fix what they see as violations and transgressions of the ›correct‹ concept of the masked crusader. As Rushkoff observes, when talking about Pulp Fiction: The movie forces »the audience to give up its attachment to linear history and accept instead a vision of American culture as a compression of a multitude of eras, and those eras themselves being reducible to iconography as simple as a leather jacket or dance step« (Rushkoff, 29). Crossovers do the same thing, repeating certain narrative themes and figures until they are devoid of meaning: the apocalyptic threat, the invasion, the ›darkest before the dawn‹ moment, the cavalry to the rescue, the deus ex machina. These are expressed via iconographical short-hands, such as the image of crashing earths, the symbols that represent certain heroes and the juxtaposition between the graphic and narrative conventions of different eras of the superhero genre. *Avengers vs. JLA*, for example, is a comic whose final set-piece hinges on an image of Superman holding both Thor's hammer and Captain America's shield. Another example, *Dark Crisis on Infinite Earths*, mines the iconography and characters from the original *Crisis* without doing comparable narrative work. The iconography and the characters are just there because they signal ›crisis‹.

Utilizing Rushkoff's concept of narrative collapse as a cultural theory, we can leave behind the closed off space of the page and the graphic novel to engage with the social sphere, in which these heroes and their tribulations dialogue with the wider world. This concept is particularly useful because it was developed to deal with postmodern narratives, and I believe *Final Crisis* to be an example of such, as is a great deal of Morrison's work. As Marc Singer has put it: »Morrison's comics harness superheroes, fantasy, and other popular genres to formulate self-reflexive critiques of these genres' conventions, histories and ideological assumptions, as well as more wide-ranging examinations of the ethics of writing« (Singer, 4).

A brief typology of crossovers

I think it is pertinent, before delving into the work at hand, to try and create a brief conceptual and functional typology of the crossover, even though there are bound to be exceptions and mixed cases:

A) Character-based crossovers: they usually spin off of a plotline belonging to a certain character or group which becomes so important that it affects others in the universe. They usually take place in the present and serve as narrative climaxes for the main heroes involved. Examples: *The Mutant Massacre*, *The Death of Superman*, *The Clone Saga*.

B) ›Reality-based‹ line-wide crossovers: they enlist the entire line of superheroes against a looming threat, but do not put the nature of the shared universe in question. Sometimes they can have a ›political‹ or ›ethical‹ bent. Examples: *Invasion!*, *Final Night*, *Civil War*, *Secret Invasion*.

C) Cosmological crossovers: they affect the entirety of the universe, and usually of the multiverse. A common threat menaces and changes the fabric of said universe or multiverse. These are the crossovers I am interested in here. Examples: *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, *Final Crisis*, *Secret Wars*.

The ones in this last category usually have a dual objective. On the one hand, they perform a narrative function, trying to establish continuity and to tie loose ends. They are like shears meant to prune the garden and leave it in better shape. On the other hand, they usually function as some kind of reset button for the line. Afterwards, new number 1s are launched,

Fig. 1: *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #1, the original image of earths clashing together. Cover by George Perez, 1985. © DC Entertainment.

creative teams are reshuffled and new characters are introduced and given their own titles. This is usually considered a good ›jumping-on point‹ for new and lapsed readers alike.

However, this fresh start coincides with the aftermath of the crisis. The consequences of the event loom large, and characters frequently spend the next few months discussing it, confusing new readers and signaling to them that they missed something. Furthermore, it is not as if these events wiped the slate completely clean. There is still history and continuity to be acknowledged and dealt with.

Finally, we come to this complicated word: continuity. Continuity, in a nutshell, means that there should be coherence and an interconnection between texts in a particular story-world. New titles should acknowledge where characters are, what their current status is, how the powers and politics of a particular world are organized and which narrative developments led there. Crossovers of the cosmological type usually aim to tidy up continuity, solve loose ends, but also rework and launch new ones. As William Proctor writes:

> [it] signals to potential new readers that a functional entry-point has been opened, a direct invitation to those who might have been put off by the improbability of catching up with fifty years of continuity. This illustrates the double logic of rebooting, one that aims to address the maelstrom of contradictions to appease fannish demand for cohesion and consistency, while also operating as a way to entice new readers with the promise of a blank slate. (227)

The problem is that these fixes never last, for the same reasons that superheroes are in a state of constant flux: because there is always more product to put out. Moreover, we have to account for personal reasons: superhero comic books engender the weirdest loyalties and fixations: any lasting change will probably be abhorred by a particular creator, who will then try to ›put things right‹.

A brief look at the state of Flash comics in 2022 is illustrative. The Flash franchise has been in the doldrums for more than a decade, and the main reason is that different interest groups cannot agree on who the Flash should be: Wally West or Barry Allen. During *Crisis on Infinite Earths* Barry Allen died to save the multiverse from the Anti-Monitor. After *Crisis* the Flash comic was relaunched starring Wally West, Allen's nephew. In a run that lasted from 1986 to 2006 Wally West became the official Flash of the DC Universe and made legacy an important thematic underpinning of the character: there should always be a Flash, while it does not matter so much who he or she is. A sort of superhero dynasty was established, which also solved the problem of how to renew and refresh the book from time to time. This was a strategy that DC employed throughout the 1990s, turning several of its landmark characters into legacy characters, sons, protegés and friends who took up the mantle.

In 2006 DC embarked on one of its cosmological crossovers with *Infinite Crisis*. It was billed as a continuation of *COIE* and, as such, it included the death of a Flash, Wally West. From there on Bart Allen, Wally's sidekick and Barry Allen's grandson, took up the mantle in a

botched attempt at a relaunch that lasted for only 13 issues. Then came an editorial mandate to kill Bart and to bring back Wally West. And afterwards, Geoff Johns and DC editorial decided that the way to move forward was to bring back Barry Allen, in a move to appease a dwindling group of nostalgists, thus ›betraying‹ the trust of those who not only wanted Wally West to continue as Flash but who had had hopes that Bart's tenure was permanent, to continue with the theme of legacy. This happened in 2008 and, ever since then, the Flash has been in constant flux, with the question of what to do with Wally West, now that his *raison d'etre* had been stripped from him, constantly hanging in the air. The book has been unable to move forward.

But let's go back to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. In a lot of ways this is the ur-text when it comes to cosmological crossovers. Published between 1985 and 1986, written by Marv Wolfman, drawn by George Perez, inked by Dick Giordano, with colors by Anthony Tollin and letters by Gaspar Saladino, it was supposed to fix all the problems that had been accruing within the DC multiverse in its 50-year history. These problems did not only result from the stories that had been told, but also from the acquisition of a series of fictional universes and characters by DC, which it had then integrated by giving each their own earth.[3] Some quotes from the most important creators involved help to explain this. Marv Wolfman commented:

> As a fan, I had always wanted to see DC continuity across the board, and had dreamed of one character uniting DC's heroes in one large story that would fix everything. (…) I began seriously thinking about it again, and started talking this old project over with Len Wein and some other people as a special series for DC. They loved it, because they saw it as a way of getting around all the convoluted, confusing series of universes and Earths and futures and pasts. (Waid, 24)

Dick Giordano, inker and also editor in chief of DC, noted at the time:

> New readers will be able to understand what is happening in our Universe without having to understand hundreds of cross references (…) Things will change. Some of our heroes will go away forever, some new ones will be introduced. We will end up with a Universe that can take us through the next 50 years. (Peel, 54)

This was achieved through the destruction of the DC multiverse and its restructuring into one single earth with one history, which was then chronicled in the two volume *History of the DC Universe*, also by Wolfman and Perez. DC went as far as offering a timeline, which was supposed to be definite.

But continuity problems started as soon as the event was over. Many projects which were meant to relaunch certain characters meddled with the timeline. Some important characters were taken off the board, wreaking havoc with related properties. The connection between the JSA and the Second World War was kept and it would continue to cause problems to the new DC Comics timeline. The practice of redrawing the boundaries of the universe and of going back and forth between one universe and a multiverse became a living and thriving tradition of DC throughout the years.

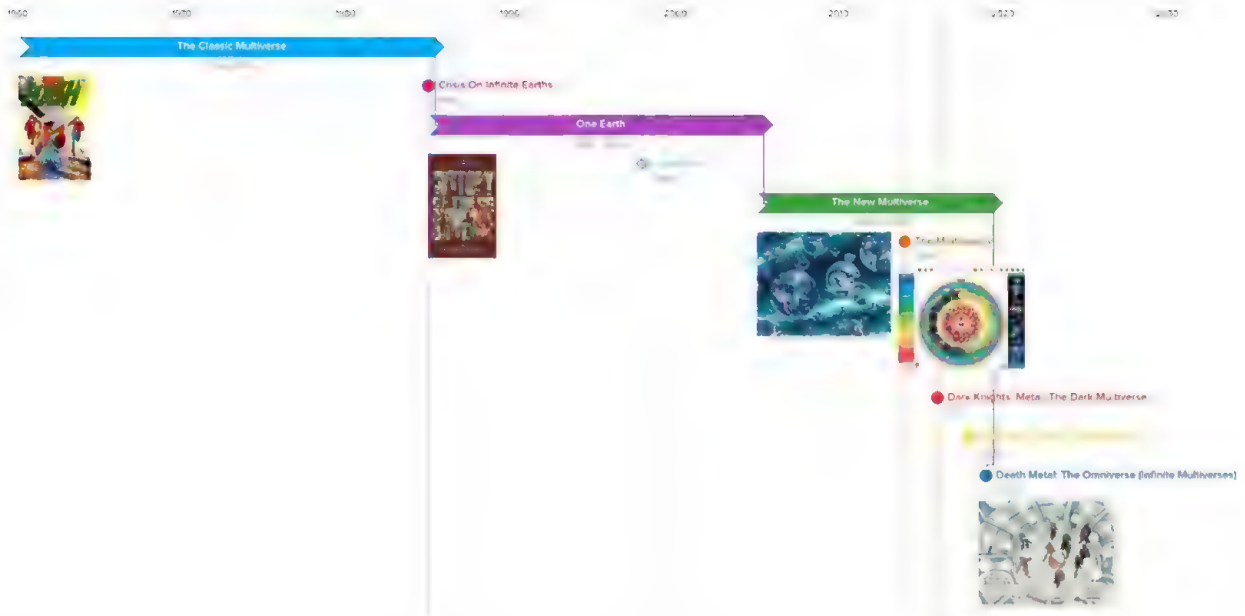

Fig. 2: The timeline of the DC Universe/Multiverse. Made by the author.

Final Crisis: the best laid plans of mice and men

And thus, we come to *Final Crisis*. This book was supposed to accomplish several missions at once:

a) First, it was the summer tentpole blockbuster from DC Comics and, as such, it had to relaunch the line.

b) Second, it was an event heavily steeped in the Fourth World characters and mythology developed by Jack Kirby for DC in the 1970s. These characters have historically been both a bug and a feature of the DC comics universe. On the one hand, they have been heavily incorporated into the mythology of the main universe, and in certain ways Darkseid has been made its primordial villain. On the other hand, they have always been a difficult sell on their own. *Final Crisis*, according to its writer, was supposed to usher in ›the Fifth World‹, a relaunch with a new spin.

c) Third, it was the continuation of stories and preoccupations running through Grant Morrison's writing from the mid-1990s onwards. It continued threads started in *JLA* and *DC One Million* (Morrison's previous crossover) and it served as a sequel of sorts to *Seven Soldiers*, the crossover-which-is-not-a-crossover that Morrison wrote during 2005–2007.

It had to do narrative work for the universe, a particular group of characters and the author at the same time. When consulted what it was about, Morrison answered with the following elevator pitch: »It's very simple. It's the day when evil wins in the DC Universe« (Phillips 2008b). But he also pointed out the tendency in crossovers towards incoherence, and the impossible task of continuity: »It's not about servicing that aspect of the business, where we're trying to set things right and fill in continuity gaps. I don't care about that stuff. Continuity gaps are always going to happen, because these stories and characters stretch over decades. It's never going to all fit together« (Phillips 2008b). Morrison seemed to be willing to sacrifice continuity to preserve the narrative aspect of it.

Confronted with the same questions, publisher in chief Dan DiDio explained: »It plays through multiple times, multiple timelines, multiple universes, multiple characters, and at the heart of it is everything that I believe makes the DC Universe unique and great« (Phillips 2008a). This sort of hucksterist explanation, which channels Stan Lee via TED Talk, could have been said of a myriad other crossovers: it has no specificity and it does not reveal anything that makes *Final Crisis* stand out. At the same time, this statement stresses the idea that the universe is what matters.

Commenting on *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, Tom Kaczynski describes DC's universe thus: »DC, with its much longer history, had a stable of popular characters, but no stable Universe«. He states that »COIE also helped solidify a business model: narrative universe as product. The idea of a universe, of multiple interlocking titles that shared a common narrative space, which emerged out of decades of comic book continuity, reified into a specific business model« (Kaczynski). This is the type of business model that DiDio was hyping with his comments.

Final Crisis was heralded in by mini-series and special issues which were meant to bridge the gap between the new event and the state of the DC slate of titles in 2006–2007. One particularly important piece was *Countdown*, a weekly series consisting of 52 issues, which was renamed *Countdown to Final Crisis* at the halfway point. This title followed the model cemented by *52*, the previous DC weekly series which had been written by Morrison, Greg Rucka, Geoff Johns and Mark Waid and had Keith Giffen doing artistic breakdowns for each issue. That series had been a complete success, mainly because of the talent assembled. But DC learned the wrong lesson from the experience: they believed that the format was the winner, and that fans would buy any weekly series despite its contents or artistic team. *Countdown*, then, was primarily written by Paul Dini with a rotating roster of writers which included Jimmy Palmiotti, Sean McKeever, Tony Bedard, Adam Beechen and Justin Gray. Breakdowns were once again provided by Keith Giffen, but the finished art was created by a diverse group of artists. *Countdown* ended up contradicting a lot of the events shown in *Final Crisis*, and deflated anticipation for the series. It was messy, absurd and overhyped. Just like superhero comics usually are. The team behind it kept try-

ing to guess and build a story that was supposed to connect with a series that had not even been fully conceived. In mid-2008 Grant Morrison would complain bitterly about the way this was handled:

> Back in 2006, I requested a moratorium on the New Gods so that I could build up some foreboding and create anticipation for their return in a new form … instead, the characters were passed around like hepatitis B to practically every writer at DC to toy with as they pleased, which, to be honest, makes it very difficult for me to reintroduce them with any sense of novelty, mystery or grandeur. (MacDonald)

This statement was jarring in its sincerity and vitriol, but it expressed a feeling that was not uncommon amongst creators tasked with shepherding the entire universe throughout the summer. In contrast to these declarations, Dan DiDio argued the following:

> What happened with Countdown, the biggest change was that we decided to move the entire DC Universe continuity together. Every month, the stories would match. It sounds great on paper [laughs], it sounds like what everyone wants, but the reality is, it was extremely difficult to pull off because what you did is you had to force so many different people and stories to move at different speeds in order to accommodate the greater good. (Phillips 2008a)

This explanation seeks to do away with the narrative dysfunctions that arise from a desire to publish contradictory spin-offs and tie-ins as part of a punishing production cycle through a discourse of good intentions: ›we just wanted what's best for the universe and our readers, we wanted to make sense of things‹, when in actuality the effect these spin-offs created was the exact opposite: confusion.

The tussle continued after *Final Crisis* was published, when a visibly annoyed Morrison would offer a fascinating look behind the scenes:

> To reiterate, hopefully for the last time, when we started work on *Final Crisis*, J.G. and I had no idea what was going to happen in *Countdown* or *Death Of The New Gods* because neither of those books existed at that point. The *Countdown* writers were later asked to ›seed‹ material from *Final Crisis* and in some cases, probably due to the pressure of filling the pages of a weekly book, that seeding amounted to entire plotlines veering off in directions I had never envisaged, anticipated or planned for in *Final Crisis*. (Brady)

These narrative and logistical problems were aggravated during the publication of the story itself when J.G. Jones, the artist who was supposed to draw all seven issues, failed to meet deadlines and was able to draw only half of #4 and #5, a couple of pages for #6 and none for #7. This caused the publishing house to call in the help of artists Marco Rudy, Carlos Pacheco and Doug Mahnke, who finished the series.[4] At first, it was thought that Pacheco would finish the pencils, but he jumped ship to Marvel, necessitating Mahnke to step in, who is known for his speedy and timely work. This rotation of fill-in artists contributed to the incoherence of the series as a whole.

Another factor that added to the confusion was the reading order. During publication, DC put out a series of tie-ins, some of which were closely related to the series, and some which told parallel stories that took place during Darkseid's takeover of earth. Having been disappointed by *Countdown*, many fans wondered which series ›counted‹ and which did not. Morrison also took the opportunity to close down some narrative strands he had been following in *Batman*, which he also wrote at that time. The end result was that the correct reading order for *Final Crisis* included everything Morrison wrote: all seven issues plus a one-shot (*Submit*) plus two issues of Batman plus the mini-series *Superman Beyond*. This has been respected in every subsequent trade paperback publication of the series, but at the time it was incredibly confusing for readers.

Final Crisis hops between genres and modes of narration, something which also accounts for its postmodern condition. In this way, it challenges the traditional master narratives of the superhero crossover.

It starts as a murder mystery around the death of the New Gods, then it morphs into an apocalyptic survival story, as Darkseid takes over the earth with the Anti-Life Equation. Meanwhile, an important tie-in, *Superman Beyond*, explains the metatextual element of the story when it reveals the history of the Monitor civilization: first there was a void, which doubles as the primordial blank page, and then this void got infected with stories. The primordial Monitor split into two and sealed the wound of narrative inside the multiverse. Then, the monitor civilization sprang up as a way to control these new worlds. Eventually, the once heroic original Monitor turned into Mandrakk, the multiversal vampire who wants to suck all meaning out of stories (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: The origin of stories in the DC Universe. *Superman Beyond* #1, Grant Morrison and J.G. Jones.

For Morrison, story, in a fictional universe, equals life. The apparition of narrative doubles as the Big Bang. And for an unlimited intelligence such as the Monitor, with no conception of the structure of stories, it also equals madness. The presence of an immense statue of Superman above the multiverse is also a symbolic representation of the start of superhero stories with his creation. The conflation of a multiverse of superhero worlds with the structure of comics is also made apparent when Superman and his crew of multiversal analogues (travelling in a spaceship that is reminiscent of The Beatles' Yellow Submarine) enter The Bleed, the amniotic substance that fills the hole between earths in the DC universe, and the page shows them as if they were inside a comic book panopticon, with each panel representing a world (fig. 4). This, of course, is how superhero comics are experienced by readers, who can switch earths simply by switching the magazine they are reading.

The last issue of the series, #7, is set inside a dark hole where stories lose their meaning. It is mostly a collection of brief vignettes and scenes whose transitions increase in abruptness, seeking a disorienting effect. Darkseid, the original villain of the piece, is done away with

Fig. 4: Superman travelling the Multiverse as if it were a comic. *Superman Beyond* #1, Grant Morrison and Doug Mahnke.

almost as an afterthought: Superman defeats him with a song. The story becomes allegorical and archetypal. Story beats lose importance in favor of thematic beats. Then there is a battle scene in which the villain is defeated by a large assemblage of heroes, some of which have not appeared before in the series, because that is how these stories must end.

This continuous feeling of deconstruction, in which tropes of the crossover are presented and then discarded, in which resolutions hinge more on the confrontation of two primal forces than on character development, in which the subtext which underlies creation is turned into text, is typical of Morrison's themes and preoccupations. Marc Singer argues that Morrison employs »visual modes of signification to bypass the symbolic deferrals of verbal signs« (16). This means that his superhero comics are filled with

> characters who serve as physical incarnations of fears, desires, or abstract concepts (…) These characters generate meaning through the concretizations and personifications of hypostasis rather than the abstractions of conventional figurative language: unlike metaphors, which defer their meanings onto absent signifiers (Mellard 159), or allegories, which refer to meanings quite separate from their allegorical vehicles (de Man 189), Morrison's hypostases embody the states they represent through their behaviors and, frequently, through their uncanny anatomies. (16)

Hypostasis, as Singer uses the term, is related to personification. Superhero characters embody concepts that encapsulate what they do in their stories. The genre is based on action and adventure, and has its most characteristic narrative mechanism in the fight scene. Morrison usually employs this action-based simplicity of the genre, and its spectacular visual presentation, to stage clashes between concepts personified as certain characters. In *Final Crisis*, Darkseid is depression, in the way his psychic takeover preys on the fears and doubts of his host, and fascism, because his ultimate goal is to wipe out free will. Superman, as is usual in Morrison's comics, is a personification of hope, but also of scientific ingenuity and exploration, which leads to better conflict resolution. This is explicitly presented in visual form when he triumphs over Darkseid by singing a song. Singer, however, does not have kind words for *Final Crisis*, which he calls »a relentless and repetitive metacommentary« (277) whose »potential themes remain strictly potential« (279) and that »rarely delivers on the revolutionary changes it promises« (281).

Many of these criticisms are undoubtably true. *Final Crisis* is important inside of the continuous narrative of Morrison's DC work, but its in-universe consequences did not last, and its ultimate metacommentary, as Singer explicitly points out, is aimed at defending the sprawling narrative nature of superhero universes, its potentially absurd confrontations and resolutions. Singer was not the only one to criticize it. This was a common response at the time, when it was attacked both for its perceived hermeticism and incoherence. Some reviews are illustrative:

> Characters are surprised and shocked to find one of the New Gods dead in the street, but didn't *Countdown to Final Crisis* over the course of the last year have that event happen over and over again? (McElhatton)

> It has been a real struggle to write the reviews for *Final Crisis*. Every time I pick up the book, I get angry over what I am reading, but then after a while, my blood stops boiling and I give it a second, third, and more often than not, a fourth and fifth reading to come to some kind of understanding with what Morrison is trying to accomplish. (Schleicher)
>
> *Final Crisis* #1 is in no way new reader friendly. It seems like every story thread here spins out of some other story, with most of the details left out. (Joel)
>
> If this issue is meant to be an exercise in experimental comic book creating, using mainstream superheroes as a pallet, then this issue is a success. But if this series is meant to impact the modern DC universe and satiate a reader's appetite for DC superhero stories, then this issue is slightly above being a failure. (G.)

At the same time, many commentators took to the internet to annotate *Final Crisis* and try to »explain« to disappointed readers why it was good (Wolk). And, given time, it has regularly popped up near the top of »best crossovers lists« (Harding).[5]

So: Is *Final Crisis* a great work of postmodern comics literature or is it just a mess? It would seem that its reception has largely depended on readers' expectations, whether they saw it as the work of an author or part of a larger publishing scheme. For readers who consumed it thinking it would help them make sense of the continuity of the DCU, it was a mess. For many readers who consumed it as part of the larger Grant Morrison oeuvre, it was consistent and progressed the story Morrison had been telling since the mid-1990s with JLA. And nowadays, removed from its immediate context of publication, it is perceived as an ›evergreen‹ title that is extremely effective, on the one hand, at conveying dystopia and hopelessness and, on the other hand, at showcasing great images and scenes such as Batman shooting Darkseid with a gun, Flash outrunning Death and Tawky Tawny, Shazam's tiger, beating a dark god. The matter of continuity has been put to rest and the story can stand on its own.

Rushkoff's conceptualization of narrative collapse, however, still applies to the story, but I would argue that, rather than being a defect, it is strategically employed by Morrison and their collaborators. This is particularly evident in issue 7. This is a book that starts with a scene set on an alternate earth where Superman is black and the President of the United States. Shortly afterwards a group of alternate Supermen from different corners of the multiverse arrive, joined by a version of Steve Ditko's objectivist hero The Question, who is actually Renee Montoya, an ally of Batman who originally was created in the 1990s *Batman: The Animated Series* and then made the jump to comics. After that, the action cuts to the last days of the Earth, while it falls into a dark hole, and the only thing left is the JLA's headquarters, The Watchtower, a lonely island against entropy. Captions, meanwhile, tell us the story of the Metal Men from Earth 44, castaways from the Multiverse who went crazy when they arrived at The Watchtower. Then, another scene change takes us to a confrontation between Superman and Darkseid which chronologically takes place before the first scenes of the book. Interspersed throughout this fight scene are single panels who check on the situation of different characters such as The Flash, Aquaman and The Atom while the world collapses (fig. 5).

Fig. 5: An example of the rapid crosscutting between characters and scenes in the last number of Final Crisis. Final Crisis #7, Grant Morrison and Doug Mahnke.

As this summary makes clear, there is a lot going on. And this description only covers the first four or five pages. This is the narrative tonality of the comic until it ends. I recently came across a tweet by comedian and comic book writer Daniel Kibblesmith that said: »A lot of comic book fans will get asked what a new reader's first comic should be and suggest Watchmen or Dark Knight or Kingdom Come when their own actual first comic was part 9 of 17 of the most confusing X-Men story ever, a more accurate sampling that also hooked them for life« (Kibblesmith). I think a case should be made for incoherence and confusion in superhero comics. They are essential parts of what makes these types of comics attractive: they engender questions in curious and obsessive readers. Who is this guy? Why does he have chainsaw arms? Why are there different earths? Why is this character so powerful? To give another example: growing up in the Global South, we did not have the amount and variety of comics US readers had access to. First, we had to deal with translations, then those translations were not evenly distributed, and sometimes one issue of one story would make its way to Argentina, and then the following ones would not. Therefore, we had to

reconstruct stories from pieces, or from information columns which spoke about comics we would never have access to. This was normal, and it was a part of the excitement that came with this detective hunt for meaning.

Many want to impose an Aristotelian view on superhero comics according to which the most important part is that they make sense, that they should be discrete units of story fit for consumption for even the most casual reader. Yet, superhero comics have never functioned like that. They thrive on incoherence; they reward readers who are willing to dig deep and delve in. This is a handicap, but it is also an invitation, because the readers that go down the rabbit hole will develop a loyalty that usually withstands the test of time. What Rushkoff rightly sees as a negative aspect of society as a whole can also be seen as a fascinating device when applied to particular postmodern narratives.

I propose that *Final Crisis* willfully produces this effect, and that it is a great work of deconstruction and willing incoherence. It is not incomprehensible, but it works hard to destabilize meaning and produce a feeling of sensory overload, just as a good crossover should, since crossovers are meant to have a number of things happening all at once. At the same time, it deals with the literal breakdown of time and space, and all corresponding categories of thought, including our narrative sense of the world and how we make sense of it through stories. Morrison is not excluding readers; they are just asking that they work harder and that they let their sense of disorientation be something that drives their curiosity.

At the same time, I would argue, against Singer's objections, that the thematic undertones of *Final Crisis* work really well. The book is built around uneasiness, darkness and a feeling of impotence that is palpable and even prescient. When Darkseid conquers Earth and everything becomes a huge factory of brainwashed workers manufacturing stuff for the tyrant, it is impossible not to trace a direct analogy to jobs in retail, Amazon, and food distribution. When Darkseid gives a rousing speech condemning free thought and exalting his will as the will of the masses, it is hard not to think of the slow slide most western societies are experiencing towards populist fascism. Nevertheless, it is a work of obvious fiction and simple solutions. In the end Superman and the DC universe triumph because they must; they are the heroes, a luxury we do not have in the real world.

Conclusions

If one considers arthrology and braiding in the way that Groensteen originally conceptualized them, as a semiotics of interconnectedness according to which every panel exists *potentially* in relation to every other panel in the work, then one can find numerous examples of it in *Final Crisis*. Examples of braiding can also be detected when one considers the through

line of Morrison's works. When read alongside *JLA*, *Seven Soldiers*, *52* and *The Multiversity*, coherent topics and themes, callbacks and obsessions emerge. However, if one considers that coherence in comics is not only a matter of semiotics, but also a matter of political economy and social circulation, then arthrology fails to explain why this work was perceived as such a complicated, confusing and even failed narrative at the time. Crossovers are made by many hands and heads. Superhero continuity is actually the art of dis-continuity. This is particularly evident in the way that three series (*Countdown*, *Death of the New Gods* and *Final Crisis*) show three different versions of the fall of Darkseid, which are completely irreconcilable, something which led a visibly annoyed Morrison to declare: »As it is, the best I can do is suggest that the somewhat contradictory depictions of Orion and Darkseid's last-last-last battle that we witnessed in *Countdown* and *DOTNG* recently were apocryphal attempts to describe an indescribable cosmic event« (Brady).

There was a disconnect between what DC presented as mandatory reading and whatever story creators were able to build out of the wreckage of editorial mandates, and also a disconnect between the purposes of the work and reader expectations. There is a percentage of readers who genuinely expect crossovers to deliver on their promise, and complain, usually on message boards and social networks, about what they rightfully perceive as incoherencies that should be smoothed over. They believe in a general consistency of the superhero universe, which simply is not true. As Rogers has pointed out: »Comic book fans can be divided loosely into three groups: collectors, who value comics primarily as commodity objects; readers, who use comics as a consumable; and reader-savers who both consume and collect comics. Both collectors and reader-savers often fall into one of two overlapping categories: completists and investor/valuationists« (155). Both readers and collectors have important reasons to demand coherence from superhero comics: the first group because they want their reading experience to be as pleasant and rewarding as possible, the second group because a more coherent and artistically valid series has more chances of becoming an ›evergreen‹ comic, which drives up the value of the original issues and makes the process of collecting them feel worthwhile. *Final Crisis*' process of and difficulties with publication, with delays and several artists working on the series, had an impact on why it was perceived as a ›mess‹.

However, if one considers thematic implications, this feeling of disintegration actually contributes (at least for me) to the willfully chaotic feel of that last issue. And it also taps into the narrative collapse proposed by Rushkoff as a hallmark of postmodern narratives. Morrison is concerned with the nature of superhero stories themselves: how they can never truly end, yet they must always reach some sort of provisional closure, and which narrative mechanics make this possible. And he is attempting a particular sensation: a crossover which deals with cosmological and metaphysical aspects of the universe thrown into chaos should be disorienting, with too many things happening at once.

Finally, I would propose a different reading of superhero comics, which takes into account its many imperfections and particularities, and which calls for immersion and a sort of chaotic detective work, following leads from title to title and character to character, letting confusion and incompleteness be a joy and a spur towards the never-ending battle of understanding them.

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Fig. 5: An example of the rapid crosscutting between characters and scenes in the last number of Final Crisis. Final Crisis #7, Grant Morrison and Doug Mahnke. © DC Entertainment.

1] Morrison recently came out as non-binary and their preferred pronouns are they/them.

2] Even though Groensteen employs a wide range of examples, particularly from newspaper strips, during the first chapter of *The System of Comics*, which concerns itself with the spatio-topical system, subsequent chapters, which are concerned with the sequence and the network, gravitate heavily towards examples taken from French-Belgian albums. One cannot but feel that, when talking about a work which is braided and whose images are heavily interconnected, Groensteen is thinking about a particular format: said Franco-Belgian album, a format of a certain tidiness and discretion. Pointedly, he employs no example from superhero comics or manga.

3] The history of DC's acquisition of competing publishing houses, characters and assets started in 1956 when they acquired the rights to the Quality Comics library following its decline and closure (Kooiman and Amash). Then it continued in 1972 when the company licensed the characters from Fawcett Comics, namely Captain Marvel and its related titles (Hamerlinck). This company had been a major competitor of DC during the 1940s, when Captain Marvel comics outsold Superman. As a result, DC had started a copyright infringement case which dragged for the best part of a decade, contributing to the comics' arm of the company closing down in 1953. In 1994 the rights were finally purchased. In 1983, DC bought the rights to the Charlton characters, which would go on to serve as a template for the protagonists of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (Cooke and

Irving). Each of these groups were given their own earth: Earth X for Quality, Earth S for Fawcett and Earth 4 for Charlton. The practice of incorporating rival companies' stable of characters and IP continued when they bought Wildstorm, an imprint of Image Comics founded by artist Jim Lee, in 1999. Most of these characters have been incorporated, with differing levels of success, into the main DC universe.

4] Alongside a veritable army of inkers. *Final Crisis* was inked by J.G. Jones during the first three issues, by Jesus Merino over Carlos Pacheco's pencils, by Christian Alamy over Doug Manhke's pencils and then, on issue 7, which was rushed into production, by Tom Nguyen, Drew Geraci, Christian Alamy, Norm Rapmund, Rodney Ramos, Doug Mahnke and Walden Wong. Colors were handled by Alex Sinclair with help from Tony Avina and Pete Pantazis on the last two issues. The number of new names called in to help signals a loss of control over the publication of the series, which neatly corresponds to its theme of decay.

5] This, by the way, is the opinion of the author of this article.

CLOSURE
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Inferential Revision in Comics Page Interpretation

A Hermeneutic Approach to Renegotiating Panel Comprehension

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What can structuralist or hermeneutic concepts add to the detailed explanations of comics comprehension offered by linguistics or cognitive studies? I argue that comics page interpretation should be extended beyond the most immediate cognitive aspects of comics page comprehension, allowing for logically later stages in that process during which a consideration of the different areas of meaning creation will be more flexible. Such an approach will be especially useful to explain artistically prompted processes of inferential revision on the distinct levels of syntactic cohesion, semantic coherence, and storyworld consistency. This usefulness rests on the ultimately non-binding manner in which expectations of comics' structures are shaped by heautonomic rules, among others, which I will conceive as auto-poetic principles of organization that contextualize comics as an intermedium between more strictly structured art forms, as principles of an art form in several genres, and as rules introduced by and applicable only to individual pieces of poetry or art. Taking my examples from the original run of *Amazing Spider-Man*, I depart from one expertly handled surprising twist in a panel to discuss different versions of the comics/language analogy and the shaping of audience expectations afforded by different conceptions of rules for a visual language. Using a complex page to illustrate how inferential revision develops, I go on to point out one exemplary overlap with theories of panel segmentation, where some ideas about a panel structure divided into several domains can serve as mediating concepts between individual artistic heautonomies and a more generalized visual language. This directs attention to artistic devices, not only in cases of surprising revelations, but when they invite inferential revision in panel sequence comprehension in general.

A ›Bad Grammar‹ Panel: Surprising Compositions

In *Amazing Spider-Man* 47 from 1967, the following panel (fig. 1)[1] stands out by its simple play with expectations:

Fig. 1. Is Bad Grammar Unforgivable?

Supervillain Kraven the Hunter thinks he is about to punch superhero Spider-Man. But the hero is in a different place than Kraven expects. That brief moment in the storyworld is underscored by the unusual structure of the panel. Its main motion is dominated by Kraven's elongated body shape and the accompanying motion lines that indicate movement from right to left, against the reading direction. Meanwhile, Spider-Man is tucked away in the top-right corner, observing Kraven's futile movement and, in fact, even presenting it to an imagined audience through his openly gesturing hands, while commenting on Kraven's failure. This gesture exploits an ambiguity between the finger gestures that Spider-Man routinely uses to shoot web fluid, and a more general pose of presenting and pointing. Web shooting would fit the context of the combat scene and the genre, but a contemplative demonstration fits the surprising calmness of Spider-Man's dialogue. What is more, we do not see any webs. The slower, demonstrative gesture contrasts with the dynamic body pose. This fits the complex temporality of the panel, as Spider-Man appears as the foregrounded scene's presenter only after that foreground has likely been taken in by the observer-readers.[2]

That Spider-Man is a commentator rather than a participant becomes clear only through an almost immediate revision of the expectations built up by the ongoing sene. John Romita's ingenious artwork is complemented nicely by Stan Lee's words, as both characters underline the turn against expectations in their dialogue. Kraven clearly expresses anticipation: »Once

I get my *hands* on you« he begins, the ›once‹ outlining that hope, and he continues in the future tense: »I'll –«, only to interrupt himself in a deflated grunt. Spider-Man then frames the interrupted sentence as an analogy to the aborted combative movement, admonishing Kraven for ending »a sentence with an *expletive*« and going on to describe such »*bad grammar*« as »unforgivable«. Taken together with his speech style and calm pose, his comment moves Kraven's words as well as the villain's physical movement to the level of object language, framed and evaluated by the hero's metalingual reflection.

How far may we take Peter's metaphorical merging of the tactically failed action with a syntactically infelicitous statement? Perhaps all three interruptions – from panel structure through combat movement to dialogue – come together: As the surprising discursive panel structure underlines one character's failed action in the story, while another character compares that failure to a syntactical mishap, does the panel structure itself mirror a mistreatment or flaunting of discursive expectations?

It is noteworthy how each of the elements assembled to create this small surprise for the observer-readers is taken from established conventions of the art form, genre, or issue. In the immediate artistic vicinity of this panel, the villain does usually come from the right when confronting the hero, which poses the antagonistic movement against the direction of the panel sequence. A quick survey of the same issue confirms this: Of the 38 panels that present Kraven in a clear binary panel, i.e., a panel with a distinguishable left and right space, he is placed on the right-hand side 22 times. Of the remaining 16 panels, 14 lack any appearance of the protagonist. 11 of these are comprised of arrangements at the beginning of new panel sequences, which set up Kraven as the main actor in a new scene, in three directly continuing runs of 4 (1967, 7–8), 4 (11–12) and 3 (19) panels each, before the perspective turns to move him back to the right side in every case. In addition to these 38 binary compositions, three more complicated panel sequences with more than two dominant spaces per panel (13–14, 16, and 19) underscore the rule by having Spider-Man belatedly enter a sequence already begun with Kraven as the main actor, whereupon the spatial configuration turns as they engage one another: See the first of these instances as one case in point (fig. 2), where Kraven's plane of action, continued from the first panel, opens up to the space above in the second panel, where the perspective shifts and Spider-Man appears vertically from above. Spider-Man eventually re-establishes himself on the left side of the fourth panel, with circular motion lines and Spider-Man's rounded and dynamic pose emphasizing the turnaround. Once again, Kraven punches empty space, though in a less surprising fashion. One might argue that the ›bad grammar‹ panel that follows in a different fight two pages later encapsulates quite the same turnaround, but compresses it into just one image, thus creating a greater surprise by the more sudden resolution, while also drawing attention to this flaunting of expectations through the dialogue.

Fig. 2. »You've Always Beaten Me By Trickery«: Spider-Man Plays Turnaround On Kraven.

Thus, as a general rule, whenever Spider-Man appears in a clearly binary panel together with Kraven, Spider-Man is drawn in the left half of the panel while Kraven is on the right; and should the panel be divided in more complex ways, the sequences resolve by returning to the same binary arrangement. The only two exceptions, in which binary panels are arranged differently, are the two moments of surprise in Spider-Man's and Kraven's combat: As Kraven

suddenly uses his special weapon in this issue (17–18), he gains the upper hand by dominating the action from the left, winning that fight. Conversely, when the misplacement of the hero is under the latter's control, as in the ›bad grammar‹ panel, the antagonist is immediately defeated and has to flee, notably by flipping around in a complicated somersault that takes the direction of his movements altogether out of the concluding sequence (fig. 3).

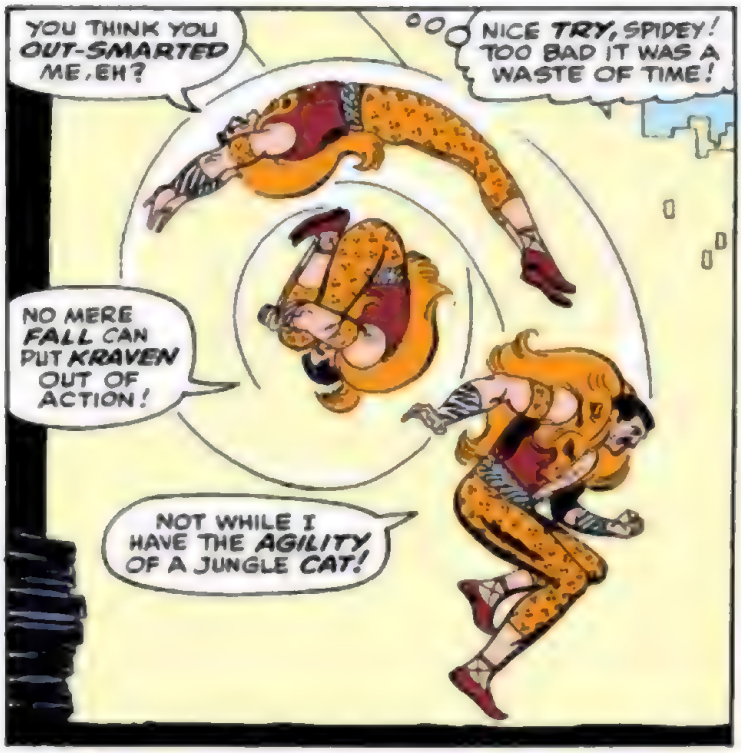

Fig. 3: Kraven Summersaults out of the Shared Space of the Combat Scene.

So we expect Kraven to come from the right, but are surprised that his movement is presented as misdirected in the ›bad grammar‹ panel. Similarly, finding Spider-Man crouching in a corner with demonstratively spread out fingers is an equally expected motif for the arachnoid protagonist; but we do not expect such sovereign immobility from him at this point, as opposed to moments before or after a fight, such as when he enters the parallel scene from above (in fig. 2). A third well-established device put to specific use in this panel's surprise is the time differential between the elaborate dialogue and the immediacy of the fast-paced action sequence's movements. This is, of course, a consequence of the ›Marvel Method‹ employed in producing this comic, which had Romita draw out whole sequences without a detailed script and Lee adding his famously verbose dialogue and captions later (cf., e.g. Groth). This discursive structure affords both the narrator and the characters much greater liberty to comment upon an event than the mere diegesis would render plausible. Lee often uses this opportunity to comment on the visually conveyed information through the narrator's or various characters' voices in attitudes that would also make sense from an extradiegetic position. In one such instance in this issue, he has Spider-Man react to a perhaps too-early encounter between hero and antagonist, which hence must remain without further consequence for the story, by suggesting: »[…] let's skip the *preliminaries* and get to the *last* act!« (fig. 2). That Spider-Man can comment on these events, almost as if he were a member of some audience or a reader-observer, underlines his superiority. (This device is completely erased in moments of actual threat to the character.)

In the ›bad grammar‹ panel (fig. 1), Spider-Man uses this sovereign attitude to turn the antagonist's speech into his direct object of observation, indirectly mocking the dynamic movement whose disruption it parallels. The panel effectively has three narrative speeds: the punch is slowed down by the time requirement implied by Kraven's words and, as his punch and speech are interrupted, the discourse slows down again for Spider-Man's lengthier and metalingual comments. This takes us out of the fight scene for good, which ends in the next panel with Kraven's retreat, somersaulting away alone against an empty panel foil.

Notably, we can neither explain the surprise offered in this panel as a complete break from nor as a complete fulfillment of the rules and the expectations that they shape. Obviously, the relationships and connections between these rules, expectations, narrative strategies, interpretations, inferences, and revisions require further elaboration. In the instance discussed so far, we have to assume that we are dealing with two different implementations of those rules, leading us to distinguish between two somewhat distinct moments in comprehension: First, we are led to expect one thing, but then, at a logically (not necessarily chronologically) later moment, we are prompted to revise our previous inferences. Since the extent of this segment is confined to just one panel, it is more limited than in typical cases of narrative unreliability (cf. Booth; Phelan; Shen; Packard 2013). While calling the instance narratively unreliable might still be technically accurate, exploring that concept in this context would add only a little to our understanding of the specific devices in play in this panel structure, taking us from the terminological traditions of grammar or a visual linguistics to those of rhetorics. Of the two techniques in question, one we have explored so far and the other adopted from unreliable narration, the latter is at home in storytelling in general, while the former is taken from comics' detailed aesthetic devices. Nevertheless, they certainly overlap in at least two ways: the observer-readers are expected to come not to one, but to two different interpretations, and they are to consider both interpretations to have been created in accordance with some rules, as opposed to a text merely contradicting itself directly and without justification. While the readers' response to a felicitous instance of unreliable narration must accept that they have been deceived fairly as they reach a surprising twist, the observer-readers of the ›bad grammar‹ panel might not even have reflected upon their shift in interpretations, if the dialogue had not pointed it out. But even without this broad hint, they would still make the same distinct inferences – Kraven's punch is directed at Spider-Man, yet Kraven's punch is not in the direction of Spider-Man, one very briefly after the other.

While all of the elements that are used to build towards the surprise in this panel are taken from established conventions, it is their combination that breaks expectations. We expect Kraven to move from right to left, but do not anticipate that space to be suddenly empty. We expect Spider-Man to crouch, but not in the middle of a fight. We expect the dialogue to stretch the temporality of moments in combat through commentary, but in this case the commentary repeats and describes the previous two visual surprises by echoing them in lin-

gually parallel constructions. If one were to think of the rules of panel structures as a grammar, by close analogy or loose metaphor, one might be hard-pressed to decide whether the panel is ungrammatical, or whether it uses the assumed grammar of comics in an especially striking and perhaps unusual way. Clearly, the panel is coherent, and the depicted events in the world are consistent, at least with regard to genre rules, which allow both for overblown violence and for lengthy intermittent dialogue from the violent actors. Even narrative expectations are ultimately fulfilled rather than violated, as the comparison with the longer scene (fig. 2) demonstrates: we might very well expect Spider-Man to evade Kraven's blows, and yet it might just take a bit more effort to realize that he does exactly that in this compressed panel. If the surprise thus concerns the process of textual or media comprehension, does it make sense to say it is prepared for on a level of syntactical cohesion rather than semantic coherence or diegetic consistency?

What are the Rules? Inferential Revision and Heautonomy in Comics

One way to expand on that question is to reconsider what kinds of rules build expectations for comics comprehension in the first place, and to ask which – if any – of them may be understood in analogy to verbal language. The treatment of cohesion and coherence in comics, at least when summarized under those terms, has recently been dominated by linguistic and cognitive approaches. The concepts emerging from the associated disciplines may often seem to overlap with an inheritance – or baggage – that comics studies has carried over from those decades starting in the 1970s in which approaches in emergent comics studies were mostly adopted from Russian formalism, literary criticism, the history of art, as well as visual and cultural studies, and thus moved closer to linguistic work, even as they eschewed a specialized linguistic vocabulary for a more generalized semiotic set of concepts.[3] Some accounts undertake reconciliation, sometimes even attempting to build bridges from McCloud's very broad concept of ›closure‹ through psychological gestalt theory and narratological concepts of implied readership to the lucid explicitness of a detailed multimodal discourse analysis or the strong empirical foundations of experimental cognitive studies.[4] Others, including some of the most prolific authors in each field, tend to strictly separate hermeneutic traditions of free interpretation from empirically grounded insights into media comprehension.

The same question does come up in these debates: To what extent can the exploration of comics' coherence and cohesion be understood as the detailing of an – if multimodal – language? But while the development of multimodal discourse analysis for comics studies (Bateman and Wildfeuer 2015 and beyond) as well as the emergence of a differentiated concept of visual language in cognitive studies (Cohn 2013) have spelled out specific, if partially differ-

ing, relationships between verbal language and the structures that supposedly underlie comics, hermeneutic traditions still seem to be using both the language metaphor and accompanying general semiotic vocabulary in a less clarified way.[5]

Let us consider this spectrum of conceptual approaches by looking at the case of the ›bad grammar‹ panel once again. McCloud's idea of ›closure‹ (McCloud, chapter 3) is itself always already conceptually transformative. It is first introduced as the process by which we complement a limited visual depiction by expanding partially represented spaces, objects, and protagonists: For a boy depicted in one panel as walking along a street, we will assume that the street continues beyond the confines of that segment cut off by the panel borders. For a body depicted from the head down to the waist, we will assume legs that are not shown. McCloud imagines this process to be motivated by the limits of our visual perception: We will only see part of a street we are walking along, yet assume that the remainder of the world persists (60), and we will be able to envision the whole of a Pepsi bottle from seeing only one part of its surface on a supermarket shelf (63). In these parts of his implicit cognitive theory, McCloud is basically following the foundational concepts as well as examples of psychological gestalt theory. In what should perhaps be more clearly marked out as a second step beyond completing each gestalt based on the salient parts of a whole, this idea of ›closure‹ that is in play when »a mere *shape* or *outline* is enough«, is then taken to encompass the »*constant*, even *overpowering*« process by which the projected sequence of movie images or the cathode-ray tube television's »*single point of light, racing across* the screen« dissolves into complete, moving images in the observers' perception (McCloud, 64).

One important difference that might be momentarily lost in this series of ideas is that the single, incomplete view of the street, bottle, or body allows us to re-examine the visual evidence as first presented, once we realize what our inferences have added (which is exactly how McCloud employs those same pictures as he demonstrates the idea). In other words, it allows for *direct* inferential revision. The ›bad grammar‹ panel does not force us to accept a surprising twist in a sequence of moving images on a screen, which we might then revise only based on our memory or by halting a video and re-examining what we saw by interrupting the most obvious order of viewing (fig. 1). Instead, Spider-Man's demonstrative gesture and verbal commentary directly invite us to refocus our attention on the left two-thirds of the panel and reconsider Kraven's powerfully directed punch as altogether misdirected, his dynamic motion as aborted rather than dominating. As McCloud moves on to a third step, now summarizing the ›closure‹ across two or more panels that brings together individual depictions to one semantically coherent whole (which he illustrates and perhaps equates with a supposedly syntactic movement that brings panels together cohesively across gutters), he emphasizes the same distinction: »The closure of *electronic* media is *continuous*, largely *involuntary* and *virtually imperceptible*. But closure in comics is *far* from continuous and *anything* but *involuntary*!« (68) It is here that a conception originally comprised of

the building blocks of immediate perception and cognition extends to a theory of implied readership, which could easily connect to the relevant theories in literary criticism (cf. Iser). For a larger sequence in *Spider-Man* (fig. 2), we might think of Spider-Man's introduction to the sequence as coinciding with his first full appearance in panel 2. But we might equally assume a different reading experience which follows Kraven's movement across the top row of panels 1 to 3, and which is then prompted only by Spider-Man's more prominent depiction in the top left of panel 3 to discover his less prominent appearance at the top of panel 2. If we instead follow the dialogue, we find that his intervention is signaled already in panel 1, as we first read his words coming in via a speech bubble from off-panel. Empirical studies and cognitive theories on the actual order of gaze movements and inferential readings can elucidate these processes much further. However, beyond and in addition to their results, it will remain true that these three possible discursive orders – Spider-Man introduced by dialogue in panel 1, Spider-Man introduced as a small depiction in panel 2, and Spider-Man introduced as a large depiction in panel 3 – are all arguably salient for the process of re-examination. The whole set-up, and especially the inquisitive construction of the dialogue (»anyone else would have waited« – »That *voice*! I'd know it *anywhere*!« – »*next* thing we know« etc.), invites the observer-readers to engage in just such a re-examination.

While such inferential revision is an important aspect of textual comprehension (cf. McNamara and Magliano; Kendeou and O'Brien; Kendeou 2014) as well as the comprehension of narrative in general (cf. Poynor et al.; Rapp and Kendeou), especially as we deal with narrative unreliability or other devices that negotiate ambiguities (cf. Dutke and von Hecker), there is evidence that it takes on additional importance when ostentatiously multimodal media products engage us in bringing together information across auditory and visual domains (Evans et al.), and similarly across single panels, panel sequences, and image and text combinations in comics (Cohn and Magliano; Cohn 2014; Cohn and Kutas 2015; 2017). In addition to fast revision processes in which »both the evaluation of mismatches and the revision of no longer relevant information can occur at an inferential processing level« (Pérez et al., 1106), artistic effects will often develop their full impact as continued discursive discussion ensues well beyond the immediate moment of primary textual comprehension. As reader-observers build arguments in self-reflexion or in discussion with one another, previously revised, suppressed, or obsolete information might resurface, as elements that were misleading or had to be reinterpreted are reconsidered. In the examples from *Amazing Spider-Man* 47 and many others, we find cues for such revision in the three-part temporal structure and the anaphoric pointers in demonstrative gestures and reverse movements, coaxing us towards just such a recognition. Arguments that evaluate the plausibility of such revisions imply different logical orders for when each inference is reached. Those assumptions need not be congruent with (but must always remain interested in) direct neurological or cognitive activity. Instead, the sequence of interpretations that they conceive belongs to the logical

progression of the on-going reconstruction of plausible semioses. It is here that concepts of hermeneutics, rhetorics, and poetology provide useful descriptive as well as some normative concepts.[6]

Such an introspective and individual, or collective and public, re-negotiation of interpretation is, of course, possible for almost all kinds of perception. But what makes it especially relevant for comics – among several other fields of media studies – is the fact that artistic products are less reliably bound to the validity of assumed and even demonstrably employed cognitive rules than are most uses of verbal, spoken or written language. The established cases of exceptions in lingual communication belong to verbal art: poetic and rhetorical language use routinely invites us to re-examine the interpretation of syntax as well as semantics in the light of later textual elements. As Thierry Groensteen has famously argued, comics studies is on a fundamentally different footing compared to traditional linguistics because the regularities by which panels are arranged into larger units are always already artistic (Groensteen, 21–23; see Packard 2018, 55, for a previous discussion in *CLOSURE*). This sets comics apart from verbal art, where the formalist tradition suggests that poetry is as grammatical as standard language, only more so, with the ›poetic function‹ being tantamount to a dominance of the ›grammatical function‹ (Jakobson, 25). In this view, what binds the elements of language together is equally what binds the elements of a poetic text together even more closely. But Groensteen believes that there is no standard, non-exceptional rule for associating sequences of panels with one another, so that any case of ›iconic solidarity‹ consists of an artistic intervention. Instead, all cohesion among comic panels has to be considered as ultimately heautonomous, with sequential art creating rules for its own use within the confines of individual pieces of art, genres, or the art form as a whole. Beyond the artistic level on which Groensteen focuses, such heautonomy may also be argued to hold for comics as a whole, if we take the claims by Dick Higgins and others seriously, who include the art form among those ›intermedium‹ expressions for which any clear rule of interpretation is missing, so that the audience is encouraged, entitled, and forced to create their own rules in interaction with the semiotic affordances of the material. However, researchers should remain attentive to any poetic rules or rhetorical devices introduced below the level of the art form or its various genres, i.e., as devices whose semantic aura is created by the repeated or emphasized use in even just one work of art. Thus, heautonomies take hold on at least three different levels, for comics altogether among all intermedia, for comics as a specific art form as well as for its various genres, and within the confines of each artwork.

But does any of this hold true in light of recent research? Given the experimental evidence in favor of a universal grammar of visual languages to be re-differentiated in different local and historically bound traditions, one might be tempted to just reject Groensteen's premise altogether. Re-arranged panels from a *Peanuts* strip, for instance, appear more or less acceptable to readers in new sequences even independently from the semantic coherence of recur-

ring referents and the consistency of the narrative conveyed, as Cohn et al. (2012) demonstrated early on. This clearly suggests a category of grammatical acceptability that mirrors that famous example from Chomsky's concept: »Colorless green ideas sleep furiously« (15), in which a sentence is recognized as syntactically correct even though it is semantically incomprehensible. In other words, malformed comics panel sequences can violate rules of cohesion and rules of coherence separately from one another. Therefore, if the structures underlying those effects can be unified as a *langage* beyond their special traditions or in *langues* and even ›dialects‹, such as those subsumed under a specific Japanese visual language (Cohn and Ehly), does that not allow for some version of a universal grammar for said visual language? Perhaps the addition of poetic rules within each art work remains imaginable, but how can we still argue that comics are an intermedium for which no definite rules of interpretation hold? How can we argue that iconic solidarity has no general structure on which to build special artistic effects?

The crux of my argument is that these two positions do not necessarily contradict one another. The fact that a language structure underlies all iconic solidarity neither entails that there is one standard solution or *degré zéro* to serve as a foil for every artistic device, nor that discursively explicable revision cannot engage with the cues that allowed the original inference to take place in ways that re-examine the various choices made by the artists and writers involved in shaping their communication. For the example discussed above, the fact that the ›Marvel Method‹ implies a two- or three-tiered temporal structure neither implies that we can uniquely reformulate a panel using that structure in one unequivocal ›standard‹ shape in which it would have appeared in some kind of normalized visual lingual code, the way we might imagine a verse turned to prose or a sequence of alliterations and rhymes removed to leave a more prosaic word choice; nor that this three-tiered structure has no further hermeneutic implications. As Saussure famously argues (45), the fact that onomatopoeia cannot be overlooked in many lexicalized terms such as ›cuckoo‹ and ›shatter‹ neither entails that lexicalization makes no further difference – ›cuckoo‹ is not the same as ›Kuckuck‹ –, nor does lexicalization conversely eradicate the onomatopoetic effect – whoever says ›cuckoo‹ cannot help but invite comparisons to the bird's call they just mimicked. And even where we find a more specific rule, such as the placement of the antagonist in binary panels with the protagonist in early *Amazing Spider-Man* comics, the existence of the rule is neither sufficient to force the shape of a panel, nor does the violation take the panel outside the realm of properly shaped graphic sequences. Does the panel engage in flaunting a grammatical rule to convey its surprising meaning? Crucially, that question has no clear answer, because there is no culturally accepted point of reference for the explication of the rule thus violated that would allow the violation and hence its meaning to be interpreted as unequivocal. Visual language structures have to be sufficient to allow for the comprehension of a sequence, but that does not leave us without ambiguity as to when standards, rules, or even necessities of that visual

language have been disregarded. Perhaps such more strictly binding standards might be possible even for visual language, and perhaps some dialects of verbal language also lack such standards; the difference, then, might well be entirely cultural, in a restrictive sense of that word. But such is the cultural situation in which mainstream comics – including *Amazing Spider-Man* – currently exist. They make good use of the opportunities this lenience affords them.

Counting Alligators: Inferential Revision in Panel Domains

This might become even more obvious once we move away from the previous example, which might arguably be confined to the lowest level of a heautonomy, i.e., that of the special self-referential rules in individual pieces of art, which might not be subjected to any kind of normalization according to a more or less universal visual language. Consider instead this page (fig. 4), depicting the early stage of another confrontation between Spider-Man and a supervillain. It is taken from *Amazing Spider-Man* 6, written by Stan Lee, but realized by the original artist Steve Ditko (15). Here it is the Lizard that threatens Spider-Man's life. As before, Spider-Man is put in a position to observe and comment upon the movements of his antagonist; but contrary to before, this does not interrupt

Fig. 4. How Many Alligators Are There?

the flow of the antagonist's movement, nor does a surprising effect dominate the nevertheless ingenious work with panel structures. Instead, Spider-Man's position is well justified, as he is carefully approaching the Lizard's hideaway in the swamp. The surprising development begins with Spider-Man losing control in panel 4, just after the mid-point of the page, slipping from the wall of the ruin he has just scaled, only to be discovered by the Lizard and his alligators.

The referential development on this page creates a nicely symmetrical effect and culminates in an ostentatiously binary panel, with Spider-Man on the left side and the Lizard on the right side of a middle axis, emphasized by the edge of the wall that insufficiently hides Spider-Man. Leading up to this iconic scene, two mirrored triangles assign both characters specific positions in the overall layout: Spider-Man dominates panel 1 on the left and panel 4 on the right before being taken up in the left half of the larger panel 5, whereas the Lizard dominates the complementary panels 2 on the right and 3 on the left before appearing in the right half of panel 5 on an (almost) equal footing. That symmetry is broken by the very first appearance of the Lizard in the background of panel 1, as well as the smaller figure of Spider-Man in the far background of panel 3. In panel 1, the Lizard is introduced as the object of Spider-Man's and the observer-reader's gaze, while the narrator's comment aligns them by telling us that Spider-Man reverts to his alter ego as photographer Peter Parker to evaluate the page as pictures: »The scene is so amazing, so fraught with drama, that Spider-Man takes a few fast *pictures* of it […]!« As Spider-Man's civilian identity, Peter Parker, works as a photographer for the Daily Bugle, here his position is likened to one who aesthetically contemplates rather than engages in the scene presented. Equally, the Lizard is framed as an object to be studied and commented upon, much as Kraven was in the ›bad grammar‹ panel. But this time, the commentary just reinforces that the pictorial sequence is well-formed, dramatic, and poignant, rather than criticizing the villain's words or motions.

Depending on whether an interpretation begins with the narrator's caption and the dialogue, or first focuses on the dominant elements in the pictorial sequence, the Lizard's appearance in panel 1 might either be obvious from the start or need to be re-discovered once the second panel brings his shape into dominance. The dialogue in the second panel fittingly comments upon just such a reversal: »We shall be the *first*!«, the Lizard exclaims from the position of his appearance in the second place, announcing an evolutionary reversal for himself and his alligators. Following this declaration, the perspective continues to move around his body in subsequent panels, moving him to the left side in panel 3 before Spider-Man's reintroduction from the left in panel 4 flips the scene around again. Note that, diegetically, the Lizard must have turned around himself, as the first panel has Spider-Man looking at his back, whereas we look at the Lizard's back in the third panel when he starts moving away from us and towards Spider-Man's supposedly unchanged position. Even then, it is difficult to reconcile Spider-Man's hanging on to a wall on his left in panels 1 and 4 with the

point from which he seems to be observing the Lizard in panel 3; or to precisely locate the lower ground he has fallen onto in panel 5, given the Lizard's scaling of steps up to that space in panel 3. Clearly, the consistency of information about the storyworld does not rest on any strictly upheld topography. Instead, the spatial information given has a coherent discursive function supported both by the general rules of cohesive sequential chains of reference and the artful symmetrical layout, placing Spider-Man and the Lizard in operatively different parts of each panel as the sequence evolves from the Lizard's introduction as a framed object of observation, to his claim of dominance and primacy, through to Spider-Man's now symbolically fraught fall to a position lower than the reptiles, from which the fight will ensue on the next page.

That discrepancy is possible because the Lizard's space, while diegetically clearly positioned in this ruin within this swamp, is constructed quite differently in the aesthetics of the panels. The diegetic placement is already ambiguous, as the ruin marks the center of the Lizard's realm, but his character is constructed around a theme of nature disrupting culture, such that it becomes Spider-Man's place to observe the Lizard from the ruin of threatened human architecture, whereas the Lizard moves around outside of it. In contrast to this, the space that houses the Lizard within the panel aesthetics is well defined, not by the walls or even the swamp but by the alligators that surround him.

Their unusual treatment on this page is best explained from a point of view of panel segmentation into several domains. Going back to Krafft's strongly hermeneutic but structurally linguistic theory of a comics grammar and many further efforts towards a structural analysis of panel sequences, we find a number of theories that distinguish several domains into which the elements in each comics panel may be subsumed (cf. Packard 2023 for a detailed recent model). The domains mediate between semantic expectations of coherence and distributive functions for sequential cohesion, as they are motivated both by the semantic content relevant to each panel and by recurrences and referential shifts across panel sequences. One such domain traditionally encompasses what Krafft refers to as ›Raumzeichen‹, spatial signifiers that define a middle ground between the depiction of salient actors as – usually strongly cartoonized – signifiers of actors or ›Handlungszeichen‹ and the indeterminate background of shapeless or merely geometrically and colorfully decorated panel foils or flat areas inside panel frames. As Krafft was perhaps first to notice, among the two recurring structural differences between actors' and spatial signs is, first, that the former will usually have a definite, unbroken circumference, such that the panel outline is less likely to cut their bodies apart and that, whenever they do so anyway, the closure of McCloud's first order, i.e., the imagination of the missing parts, is easily accomplished and unequivocal due to the well-established gestalt of their body shapes. Secondly and by the same measure, actors' signs are countable: we know that there is one Spider-Man and one Lizard, two agents Dupond and Dupont in *Tintin*, three nephews for Donald in the *Duck* comics – and, in any case, the consistency of

a scene requires that observer-readers may keep track of the pertinent actors. In contrast to this, spatial signifiers may depict a forest with shifting and changing amounts of trees, a meadow with uncountable blades and bushels of grass, and even, as in the case under consideration, a building with some unclear borders, walls, windows, stairs, and levels. Krafft goes on to describe the cohesion of a sequence by pointing out the necessity to repeat actors' signs throughout a panel sequence, and the possibility to signal the beginning of a new sequence by setting up new actors to characterize new scenes. Spatial signs, on the other hand, are reducible up to the point of complete omission, constituting the oft-discussed dropped backgrounds in comics panel sequences (cf. e.g. Edlin and Reiss). Conversely, new elements can appear in these spaces merely as a change in depiction or focus, without signaling their sudden appearance in the story-world. An additional tree, blade of grass, or even wall or window is acceptable as new information about unchanged objects. Spatial domains in panels are productive in this sense (cf. Packard 2006, chapter 5), as they bring forth new elements in the progression of a panel sequence. In both senses, spatial domains in comic panel sequences are depicted by ›open signifiers‹ (Krafft; Packard 2015).

Semantically, we would expect the alligators to be depicted as actors' signs. Spider-Man clearly thinks of them as independent agents when he considers their potential threat: »[…] huge *alligators*! But they seem to be *obedient* to him!« The Lizard addresses them as his »pets« in panel 1, includes them in the first-person plural in panel 2, exhorts them to follow him in panel 3, and orders them to fight in panel 5. However, even

Fig. 5: Where Are The Alligators?

these lingual representations allow us to dismiss an exact count of the animals: the Lizard is accompanied by several alligators, but how many there are exactly remains unclear. The pictorial realization treats these beasts differently than it does the actors' signs for Spider-Man and the Lizard. Even though the circumference of their bodies and the distinct coloring set the alligators apart, their exact number remains unclear. On the following page (16, fig. 4), it is also their exact position that becomes impossible to determine, as their tails hit the walls of the ruin from what, in panel 4, seems to be not just in front of and behind, but also underneath and above Spider-Man's position. Even on the previous page, there is a tendency to have the alligators' bodies cut off by panel borders.

That this treatment of the alligators is possible is easy to explain in terms of Krafft's constructive rules for panel sequences. One might equally argue that a concept of relevance automatically reduces the amount of alligators from any specific number to ›several‹ (cf. Forceville).[7] However, the salience of this implementation of the animal depictions in the panel and sequence structure becomes clearer when we consider how the association between the panel elements and panel domains is subject to inferential revision in the course of this page. What might appear to be an objectified image to be gazed upon in panel 1 and would most likely be expected to appear as actors' signs in the progression of the scene, is actually employed as a flexible denotation of a space that surrounds the Lizard, travels with him, and ultimately tears down the more readily recognizable spatial arrangement of the architectural ruin. The alligators are to the Lizard what the ruin is to Spider-Man. Thus, the number of actors is reduced to the binary logic of protagonist and antagonist, and the space of the binary panel at the end of this page (fig. 3) that sets up their fight actually contains two, not one, semantically loaded spaces: the house from which Spider-Man falls, and the realm of alligators with which the Lizard ascends.

Hands and Faces in a Semiotic Anatomy of Comics

If we want to continue the hermeneutic bent of this approach, some validation might come from the title of each episode. The issue in which Kraven the Hunter surprisingly fails to connect his hand to Spider-Man is titled, »In the Hands of the Hunter!« The earlier issue in which Spider-Man fails to merely observe and is instead directly confronted with the Lizard is titled, »Face-to-face with… the Lizard!« But the validation of such a hermeneutic approach should not be based on such far too easily found (and cherry-picked) clues. The point of a close hermeneutic analysis of the cohesion and coherence across panel sequences must not be to disregard visual language in favor of an unbound freedom of free association. Its usefulness, however, may lie in detailing the engagement with the rules of visual language as the inferential revision of each syntactic cue on the page may play a role for the re-interpreta-

tion of a comic's meaning in the constant process of reconsidering and debating the indications that rely upon, but also play with the grammar of comics to allow for their poetry and rhetorics, summarized in an equally defined and productive semiotics of comics pages' structures and elements.

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Fig. 1: *Amazing Spider-Man* 47 (1967, 15).

Fig. 2: *Amazing Spider-Man* 47 (1967, 13).

Fig. 3: *Amazing Spider-Man* 47 (1967, 15).

Fig. 4: *Amazing Spider-Man* 6 (1963, 15).

Fig. 5: *Amazing Spider-Man* 6 (1963, 16).

1] This discussion expands and corrects a very brief engagement with this panel in my earlier attempt at a psychosemiotic theory of comics (Packard 2006, 112–113).

2] Here and in the following, I conceive of comics' audiences as observer-readers in line with Nina Eckhoff-Heindl's concept of the ›lesend-betrachtenden‹.

3] Cf. the excellent overview, at least for German comics studies, in Bateman and Wildfeuer (2016).

4] One instance is found in the Call for Papers for ComFor's 2021 annual conference.

5] For instance, the – ingenious – treatise by Frahm, purporting to describe the ›language of comics‹ – *Sprache des Comics* – demonstrates and then subverts, but still continuously relies on this trope.

6] Together with the linguistic conceptualizations, they might be summarized in a general pragmaticist semiotics; cf. Packard 2023, forthcoming.

7] My thanks to Charles Forceville for pointing this out at ComFor's annual conference in 2021.